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Julia Kristeva; Ellen Conroy Kennedy

Signs, Vol. 1, No. 1. (Autumn, 1975), pp. 57-81.

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On the Women of China

Julia Kristeva

Translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy

The Chinese feudal family was an economic as well as a kinship unit centered about the dominant symbolic function of the father. From this we can understand that to settle accounts with the old economic system and the old ideology a single blow could suffice: *the Marriage Law*. In Russia, Lenin's decree on the land had left the ideological problem open: the authority of the Church still surpassed that of *zadruga*,¹ creating the further necessity of an atheist campaign, a fight against the Church. In China, as M. J. Meijer very justly notes, the Church was the family. To attack the patriarchal family was to attack the heart of the Chinese economy *and* ideology, their point of intersection, their chief support. Even if its intent was simply economic to begin with, the Chinese social revolution was, because of its agrarian reform, immediately antipatriarchal. And a revolution against the father had to constitute at the same time a revolution of women. The problem: to what extent?

In the era of the Jiangxi Soviet (1931–34),² when one needed above

This is the first English translation of a chapter of Kristeva's book, *Des Chinoises*, which was originally published in Paris by the Editions des Femmes in November 1974. For sharing her knowledge of Chinese family life and culture, I am grateful to Marilyn Young of the Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104. While I am responsible for the final English version, I am most grateful also to Domna C. Stanton, Serge Gavronsky, and May Pack for their learned contributions to the editing of the translation (ECK).

The original title of Kristeva's chapter is "La Loi du mariage (1950). La démographie et l'amour. Les femmes au poste de commandement" [The marriage law (1950). Demography and love. Women in positions of authority].

1. The traditional patriarchal clan of prerevolutionary Russia, in which an authoritarian elder and his wife lived with their married sons, daughters-in-law, and children (translator).

2. Romanized spellings of Chinese proper names conform to those in Kristeva's French text, following the model still new to most Western readers (translator).

[Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1975, vol. 1, no. 1]
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all to *destroy* the old rather than *construct* the new, it was possible to cast doubt on authority and let the disappearance of the family be anticipated. After the Long March, after the war, during the Cold War when the primary task was to build a new regime, the maintenance of one untouchable authority, the family, seemed a necessity. Women might only hope for an equal share of responsibility with men in its management. The *Marriage Law* had two objectives: to combat the ancient feudal family and to encourage the responsibility of women. Add to these the struggle against a new enemy, "bourgeois morality," an inclusive term for all that threatened family stability, for all that might prevent women from exercising their responsibilities as mothers and citizens in ways not related to patriarchal puritanism (i.e., adultery, prostitution, various abuses of money and power, etc.).

The *Marriage Law* was preceded, therefore, by the *Legal Arrangements on Agrarian Law* (1947). The construction of the new nation was to begin, as the Marxist rule would have it, from its base. But from the very first attempts to put these directives into action it was obvious that agrarian reform was a reform of the family, clashing with ancient economic as well as ideological structures. Numerous voices, above all in women's organizations, demanded that the problems of women and the struggle against the patriarchal *jia*³ be given priority. The Chinese Communist party heard this demand, supported it to keep from "cutting itself off from the masses," then once more subordinated the women's issue to the economic one. Agrarian reform seemed more urgent, and in any case dominated the demands of women. As a result, women's discontent with the family became a constructive force for the new economic structures, and in places it even became the principal strength of agrarian reform. Xiu Guang, now vice-president of the Revolutionary Committee of western Peking, summarizes the period this way:

Like marriage at the time, medical care for women and children and others was among the urgent problems that faced Zhaojiashuang (the region where Xiu Guang was working in 1947). Many peasant women proposed that our organization "occupy itself exclusively with the well-being of women," and "leave agrarian reform to the peasant union." At the end of the discussion within the women's organization, it was unanimously agreed that the latter should watch over the immediate concerns of women, under threat of seeing itself "cut off from the masses." The achievement of the central task of the revolution, that is to say the agrarian reform, was still more important. . . . Women proved very active in the course of the agrarian reform movement. . . . In the agrarian reform, each poor peasant received a share of land. In order to underline the equality between man and woman on the economic level, peasant women were given their own personal land grants with their own

3. Traditional Chinese family clan or household (translator).

names, as well as their family names, written thereon. Many of them, who had been known up to then only by such names as "woman of the house of So-and-So" or "mother of X," were specifically addressed by their own names for the first time.⁴

After a year and five months of preparation, through popular debate, legal deliberations, and discussions in women's organizations, the *Marriage Law* was proclaimed by Mao on May 1, 1950 and adopted by the government and the Political Consultative Conference of the Chinese People on December 1, 1951. The first article enunciates the general principal: "The feudal marriage system, based on an arbitrary arrangement compelling the superiority of man over woman, and ignoring the interests of children, is abolished. . . . A 'new democratic marriage' will be established, based on the free choice of monogamous partners, with equal rights for both sexes and protection of the legitimate interests of women and children."

Once again, compared with bourgeois legislation, the *Marriage Law* is a moral code rather than a law. What is lacking in it is a *text*—differentiations, precisions, the taking into account of multiple cases and situations. This lack leaves the door wide open to interpretations and therefore to an uncontrollable bureaucracy. (Bourgeois bureaucracy is subject to extremely detailed laws, with the simple result that if the socialist law is more egalitarian, bourgeois law offers better protection of rights.) Conversely, if more or less free debate occurs among the masses, law and jurisdiction cease to exist and give way to a regulation based on popular ethic in which the one who has power will triumph, the choice being evidently limited between bureaucracy and a libertarian drive. The fate of democracy depends, then, on the possibility that the masses may go against the prevailing wind, with all the risks of arbitrariness this also supposes.

With these limits, those of socialist lawmaking, the *Marriage Law* gives *more rights to women* than does bourgeois law.

First of all, the husband and wife have equal status in the family. Chinese law does not recognize a "head of the family." Article 7 says: "Husband and wife are companions living together and enjoying equal status in the home."

Next, the *Law* is more partial to women than Western laws are. Hence, women may not only keep their maiden names (article 11), but children have the right to take their mother's name. (This provision, not formulated by law but by later decisions, is generally considered part of the *Marriage Law*.) One's Name (the proper noun) is, we have said, the symbolic equivalent of unity and power in society, hence its "virile" or "phallic" worth for the imagination. To authorize women to keep their names is, consequently, not only to act against patrilineal descent (as Xiu

4. Xiu Guang, *La Chine en construction* (March 1973).

Guang earlier remarked) but, at the same time, to elevate women to power on the symbolic plane. This “virilization,” this “phallicizing” of women, can help them emerge from the home, from the “bedroom” and the more or less psychotic sexual pleasure in which they are traditionally engulfed with more or less enjoyment and profit; it offers protection against psychosis as well as against the cultural, economic, and political retardation of the feminine population. But actually, to recognize a woman’s real name (that is her father’s name) is only a first step, one which would have impact against a patriarchal society only if it were followed by another: the possibility for a woman to make her own symbolic name; that is to say, to create her own “personality,” her own language, her own social function. In China the question is only raised, but raised with more clarity, perhaps, than it is with us because the Confucian patriarchal system, more than monotheistic patriarchies, has been obsessed by the mother, by her sexuality, and by her function with regard to power.⁵ It is possible, therefore, that the effects of this “right to have a name” (her father’s name) may not be the same for an Occidental woman as for a Chinese woman. A Western woman with her father’s name—even more when this name is recognized as being hers, as the sign of her own symbolic worth—inevitably finds herself virilized and placed in the status of a “free-autonomous-individual-without-sex,” a status which even when not specifically equivalent to mastery and power nevertheless partakes of the phallus itself. From identification and projection, perhaps, we fear the same effect on Chinese women. I remember my own discomfort, and still more that of the men in our group, when confronted with Chinese women who were school principals or factory directors—women with names and power. But it is possible too that in the libidinal and symbolic organization of the Chinese world the fact of bearing your own name does not necessarily make you an “individual, asexual, and metaphysical entity.” For this is an organization where the cleavage between the private erotic universe and the universe of collective standards is more radical than in ours, where the erotic expenditure is less repressed (cf. the survival of matriarchy even in the Confucian family) and, above all, has a modality of socialization certainly secret, esoteric, and underlying the official ethics, but nonetheless universal and occurring everywhere (cf. Chinese Taoism or Buddhism). The fact of bearing your own name, however, permits you to function as an element—one graphic sign in a tissue of meanings—on two stages; that of the instincts and that of the law, constantly provoked by what for us would be “psychosis” and constantly revoked in relation to it.

5. In the traditional Confucian family, the mother of grown sons has enormous influence over them, wields almost absolute authority over her daughters-in-law, and sometimes controls the purse strings as well—themes treated by Kristeva in earlier chapters of her book (translator).

Other advantages, foreseen by the *Law*, theoretically favor this status of Chinese woman: not as a free individual, but as an active element in the realm of sexuality (which she has always been) and in that of productivity (which she is beginning to be). Thus, a man does not have the right to ask for a divorce while the woman is pregnant nor until a year after the birth of the child; the woman, on the other hand, may (article 18). After divorce, it is the mother who is normally in charge of the nursing child (in cases where there is dispute, the question is decided in "the interest of the child" [article 20]).

Finally, the *Marriage Law* takes into consideration the work of keeping house. Not only is this work considered a social occupation on the same level as others, not only is the attempt made to lighten it by ideological propaganda (encouraging men to participate in running the house) and by economic measures (the creation of nurseries, public dining halls, etc.), but a form of payment for women's household work is envisaged in article 10, which postulates that a woman's work in the home is equal to that of a man outside it and gives woman equal rights with man to the family property. In the absence of private property, or the "marriage contract" which regulates family property in French law, for example, this clause of the Chinese law gives the housewife considerable advantage: it erases the distinction between nonproductive and productive work, gives ownership to a woman who produces no consumer goods, and by this very provision lends a certain economic basis to the ideological demand for freedom and autonomy in work considered "peculiarly feminine" (cooking, housekeeping, child care, etc.) and not only to work that women workers perform in the socialist economy. Given the fact that even under the economic conditions of the most industrialized societies housework continues to absorb the effort of the overwhelming majority of women (extreme mechanization does not replace the personal servant who is becoming more and more rare), the Western housewife, in contrast to the Chinese, will remain the "home proletarian" as long as a legal arrangement (perhaps a temporary one accompanied by an intense ideological campaign which in the long run would make the law unnecessary) in the marriage contract or elsewhere does not provide compensation for household work.

The family in which this status of the Chinese woman is practiced is a stable institution and, as we shall see, constituted differently according to the economic and political phases of Chinese socialism. It is nonetheless true that the *Law*, as well as the interpretations of it we were able to hear during our trip, gives the impression that the family is a *transitory* institution. In the *Law* it is the ease with which one may divorce that particularly leaves this impression. Divorce is the acknowledgment of a factual state, and it is granted immediately if there is mutual consent after an attempt at reconciliation should this be the wish of only one of the two parties. The ease of divorce has been such that the 1950 *Marriage*

Law was for some time more familiarly known as the *Divorce Law*. In 1950 statistics showed 186,167 divorces; a year later the total rose abruptly to 409,500; two years later it was 832,000. From 1956 onward divorce totals have been in the millions.

At the present time divorce is far less easy. In a people's commune near Nanking called "Tong Jin" (the Bronze Well), which boasts 30,000 inhabitants, there has been only one divorce in the eight years since the Cultural Revolution! Because, "... the choice of the husband and the woman being free, in the absence of disputes over property, there are no serious grounds for divorce that discussion with comrades cannot settle . . .," as He Lixian, vice-president of the Administrative Committee, has said. But even if, for the moment, one maintains the family by creating obstacles to divorce, the familial cell does not seem to be protected as a basic unit in the new society. Two characteristics of the family remain permanent, however, through all the fluctuations of the successive campaigns directed at it: it is a biological limit; it is an *educational* institution. The *Marriage Law* postulates: "The relationship between parents and children does not cease even after the parents divorce" (article 20). Zhao Guangwu, professor of philosophy and dean of the Department of Dialectical Materialism at the University of Peking, told us that: "the forms of the family can change in history, but the family as such will never disappear because the blood relationship cannot disappear."

Is it an impossibility to think that the species can reproduce itself without the institution of the family? . . . or is the family as an institution already considered empty of psychological and political meaning because society can take all these functions upon itself at some time or other? . . . because the term "family" is already understood to mean purely and simply the act of reproduction? . . . by maintaining the family does society, then, do no more than give itself a means of control over the rate of its growth? a means of control that may still be called "family" today but have another name tomorrow—while the true seat of the educational, ethical, and productive process may have little or nothing to do with biological reproduction? Yet, even if it were possible, who or what would replace this camera for the imaginary recording of phantasms, of psychology, of feelings which the family is today—whatever its mode of production, whatever the differences reflected by religions? Would it be the disappearance or the reabsorption of this zone of the imaginary? or would it be the immediate investment of its potential in the "common lot," in politics—with all the passions and the risks which that supposes? In any case, there is no doubt about it—no one has reached this point either here or in China.

Compared with the laws that precede the Liberation, the *Marriage Law* still gives evidence of a certain "family spirit" while it vigorously defends the right of women, as did the Jiangxi Soviet; and it goes even further since it authorizes women not only to keep their own name but

to transmit it to their children. From now on the task is to replace the feudal and bourgeois families by creating a "new type of family" about which three essential indications are given.

1. The foundations of this family are of an *ethical* rather than an economic nature. The *Law* insists on the equality of the spouses as "companions living together" who must "love" one another, to such a point that in modern China one no longer refers to "husband" or "wife" but to "the beloved man" or "the beloved woman" (*aimé* or *aimée*)—terms which seem ridiculous to Chinese raised before this proclamation. This emphasis on the moral bond, however, does not leave the economic one forgotten: the *Law* specifies that parents and children have the right to inherit one another's property.

2. A third person appears in the man/woman relationship: the *child*, who has all rights to protection and education, plus the duty of helping his parents.

3. The *Law* does not mention *de facto* marriages but requires the *registration* of every conjugal union—a symbolic act against the old feudal arrangement by parents but also an act acknowledging the people's power, since one presents oneself to this power in registering as married. Divorce too must be registered with district authorities. If the tribunal grants the custody of children to the woman, the father is responsible for all or part of the costs of their maintenance and education.

Article 8, which suggests that the family is considered not in itself but as a link between individuals and the politics of the socialist community, is particularly interesting. The family is a sort of school, a cell for the socialist education of the children and the propagation of the socialist ethic, but it does not exist in itself and for itself. "The husband and the wife have the obligation to love each other, respect one another, help and care for one another, live in harmony, engage in productive work, care for their children, and work together for the well-being of their family and the construction of the new society."

During our trip, the teachers at the Changjianlu Secondary School in Nanking told us that three factors are responsible for the education of children: the family, the school, and society. One can easily imagine that the most basic grouping—the family—possesses the essential educational function, so that the school—a supplement of the family—does not intervene except to resolve what the family cannot accomplish, given the present specializations in knowledge (the teaching of math, for example). This educational function seems to take priority over the family's reproductive function; for example, divorce is refused if the reason is the lack of children or the woman's physical defects.⁶ With the mainte-

6. *Renmin Ribao*, December 27, 1951, newspaper cited by M. J. Meijer in *Marriage Law and Policy in the Chinese People's Republic* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1971), p. 109.

nance of the family as an institution, even if it is for reasons we might call more than familial, a rigid morality is instituted. To justify the policy against “free” love and marriage they evoke not only the reticence of peasants and soldiers but also the notion that such liberties risk destroying the security of women and children in a society where a patriarchal mentality coexists with vestiges of colonialist bourgeois morals. This rigor has not yet become puritanism, however; thus, if bigamy is punished, adultery is not. Adultery is considered the result of a contradiction of opinions that can be resolved by propaganda encouraging the Communist morality. Obviously, in 1950 as well as later, the question of “sex education,” or some kind of analytical approach to sexuality, was certainly not posed. The new society seemed intoxicated by its newly acquired freedom in the choice of sex partners which launched a wave of divorces. Women made up the overwhelming majority of candidates for divorce—92.4 percent in certain regions between 1950 and 1952. In principle, the simultaneous goals of the *Marriage Law* and the *Agrarian Reform* facilitated the wave: the clan system had been deprived of its economic foundation by the Reform; women were owners of private property just as men were; the struggle against superstition had undermined patriarchal authority.

Yet now, just as with the blaze of suffragette activity at the beginning of the century, a wave of feminine suicides, between 70,000 and 80,000, followed the wave of divorces.⁷ The hostility of rural people to the divorced woman, or the slowdown by certain local authorities in granting divorces demanded by women, seems to have been the cause of these suicides. (Elsewhere, on the other hand, women obtained divorces more easily because their motive was interpreted as being antifeudal while requests for divorce on the part of men were rejected as being “petit-bourgeois.”)

In any case, if the suicides testify to a crisis it was surely the crisis of perhaps too brutal a transition from the feudal family to an “other” kind of family, not at all a crisis over the principle of family itself. Here is the basic difference between the family system and the status of women in the West, on the one hand, and, on the other, the family system and status of women in China. Among us, divorce, contraception, and “sexual freedom” attest to a breakdown of the family. It becomes impossible to maintain the family as an institution once it runs into the experiences that each member alone has with his desires in the exchequer of language and power. In China, the family does not pass through one crisis in order to disappear into a larger symbolic and economic whole. To the extent that, as we have seen, our “psychological” family has never existed in China but that the family in China has always been a symbolic and productive contract, it does not enter into crisis. Another contract

7. According to *Renmin Ribao*, February 25, 1953, cited by Meijer, p. 105.

—another symbolic unit or unit of production, superior to the clan—simply replaces it. And, in a single blow, the *jia* loses most of its reason for being, loses what made it the support of Confucianism, a substitute for the “Church” in China. But what about the “other” aspect of family life—the “art of the bedroom,” the Taoist “sex manuals” that we alluded to earlier?⁸ To leave this aspect of the new political ethics of the modern family in the dark, not to deal with it, is this a simple postponement, the result of reasoning that “one can’t do everything all at once”? Or is this cleavage (the sexual on the one hand and the political ethic on the other) a cultural trait, a specific way of regulating the social taboo, sublimation, and sensual pleasures, a way that is no worse, and perhaps even more successful, than others? Or is it the legacy of a Confucianism which persists even though the *content* of the new ethics is not the same? But then if the Confucian *structure* endures beneath the new *content*, just how far can the struggle against Confucius go? One thing is sure: the *Marriage Law* and, as we shall see, its later interpretations do not attack the *principle* of the family but preserve it as a unit of biological reproduction (as the reservoir of the race), and implicitly as the locus of eroticism, on condition that this is not openly talked of; it is, therefore, an intermediary between desire on the one hand and the organisms of political and economic power on the other in which and through which the family disappears as a debatable issue. It disappears, but not without first having caught, shaped, modeled, and educated all the instinctual and symbolic capacities of its subjects. Chinese woman, transmitter of this education since time immemorial, becomes from this point on a responsible party in the units of economic and political power as well. This is a supremacy without historical precedent.

The difficulties encountered in applying the *Marriage Law*, and probably also the regime’s emphasis on greater production efforts, are in all likelihood among the reasons that provoked a change of attitude toward the family beginning in 1953. A general directive of February 1, 1953, signed by Chou En Lai, basically stresses “conjugal happiness,” without referring any longer to difficulties arising from feudal survivals. The directive was followed by a mass movement reflected in the press: married couples revealed the secrets of their family harmony. At the same time, the attack was directed against *bourgeois* morality rather than against the *feudal* spirit. Haste to divorce was considered a “bourgeois trait”; the little couples in rural areas, for example, with their aim of accumulating property were “bourgeois,” as was the marriage of convenience in which a partner was chosen for economic considerations (worthy profession, important job) rather than for love; a lack of respect for parents, adultery, concubinage, etc., were also “bourgeois” traits. Reading these articles, one gets the impression that two currents may get

8. Kristeva discusses the sex treatises and erotic rites of feudal China in “La Mère au centre,” an earlier chapter of *Des Chinoises* (translator).

the better of socialist ethics: on the one hand, a sexuality which is difficult to restrain and which bursts the bounds of law; on the other, a profit motive, a tendency to accumulate private wealth that takes advantage of the new legal provisions in the collectivizing process which nonetheless leaves a certain margin for private initiative. Confronted with these two dangers, the experimentation with "freedom" of the Jiangxi type is no longer anything but a memory. The new reality calls upon the superego, not the "sexual component" of the revolution.

In 1956–57 the campaign against bourgeois thinking was revised, becoming more sophisticated than the one of 1953. Women are advised to avoid coquetry and encouraged to cultivate intellectual values. It is as if there were a concerted effort to tear the feminine population away from the seductive, reproductive domain, in which it has such tendency to take delight, in order to make it participate in the work of socialism, even to direct that work. Did women resist this call to emerge from the home and accede to a social life above the family? The written word, in any case, incites them to educate themselves and to politicize. One no longer finds documents, like those of the pre-Liberation era, which criticized the official propaganda as being too stereotyped, ill-suited to the desires and needs of the feminine public.

The exigency of a Communist morality, the censure of secret polygamy, adultery, and procuring, is not only accentuated but takes severe forms. There is particular mention of those who use their social and political power to institute mores contrary to the ethics proclaimed by the *Marriage Law*. Must we conclude that certain authorities were profiting from their positions by behaving like feudal lords, the masters of land and women? A poster of March 1, 1956, photographed by some Westerners, displays the death warrant (signed by the Peoples' Tribunal of Guilin in South China) of a schoolteacher who was executed for having raped several of his students.

The first census of the Peoples' Republic of China, showing that the population was easily approaching 600 million (in 1958), first provoked enthusiasm among the nation's leaders, confident of the role such a human force could play in the realization of a new economy and the triumph of new ideas. The problem of sufficient economic resources to maintain this population, however, very soon became apparent. From 1956 onward a campaign was undertaken to limit the birthrate "in order to lower the consumption rate of non-productive persons during the current period of building socialism." Measures were taken to sterilize the masculine and feminine population as well as to promote contraception and abortion (which, along with infanticide in the poor classes, had been rather widely practiced in the past by primitive means). Family planning was meant to put an end to the time when "one saw nothing but pregnant women without hearing the laughter of children." As one might have expected, this policy ran into stubborn resistance, not only

from men who did not wish to be sterilized but also from many women who still felt fertility was their principal worth and who accepted interference in the business of sex with difficulty. Raising the recommended age for marriage (it is twenty-eight for boys, twenty-five for girls at the present time), without making it a legal requirement, became an ideological necessity and a practical reality, resulting in a decline in the birth-rate. The encouragement of small families—two children being the ideal number—was added to these measures. (All those members of the upper- or middle-level cadres we met in China, even in the country, had families of two or, at most, three children.) The situation is still quite different in the typical rural milieu, despite the incontestable success of family planning in the last few years. He Lixian, vice-president of the *Tong Jin* peoples' commune near Nanking, admitted to us that her village's only serious ideological problems have to do with the survival of superstitions. These are summed up, in her eyes, by the desire to have male children together with the different ceremonies practiced either to obtain them or to celebrate their arrival in the world.

At this very moment, in every production unit of China (peoples' communes, factories, and also in city neighborhoods), special courses are organized for the propagation of "family planning" through the use of contraceptives, ranging from pills to various mechanical means. All these products are distributed free to workers of both sexes through the medical offices of the production units or can be bought very cheaply by prescription in any drugstore by those rare persons who do not work. The big pharmacy across from the Central Department Store in Peking has a prominent window display, complete with drawings and diagrams, on the need for and the different means of contraception. Contrary to certain official proclamations, contraceptives seem to be distributed or sold to the married *and* to the unmarried, especially in this Peking drugstore. Likewise, free abortion is available not only to married women; unmarried women normally have access to it as well, although socialist morality aims to keep their number to a minimum.

This policy of population reduction, or at least of maintaining population growth at a stable level (2 percent in recent years), which is not proclaimed internationally for obvious reasons but is no less vigorously applied within China, well illustrates that one of the family's essential functions at the moment is to permit those in power to exercise control over population growth. In view of this goal, the educational role of the family alluded to earlier is once again emphasized; but also and at the same time the human relationships which the family must protect and create are stressed, rather than the family's role of ensuring reproduction at all cost. One can even do without the latter, as an interesting divorce case proves. A man whose wife has just had a hysterectomy is refused divorce because of article 8 ("the husband and the wife are bound by love . . .") which postulates in effect the obligation for a mar-

ried couple to raise children but not to beget them (adoption is free). Love therefore takes precedence over reproduction; but beyond love there is the highest sublimation—the effort to construct the new society. Deng Yingchao, wife of the prime minister and a central figure in the Federation of Chinese Women, writes of the *Marriage Law*:

Men and women must be encouraged to maintain social relations, and bachelors of both sexes to fall in love freely with one another. . . . It is indispensable for a good number of our civil servants to become convinced that love and marriage are strictly the private interests of individual persons and that no one has the right to interfere in them. . . . The harmonious blossoming of love and marriage . . . is the essential condition of a satisfying social life. Yet we refuse to consider love as sovereign, just as we refuse to consider it as a simple pastime. We are moreover opposed to all artificial means which could not assure the perpetuation of love, such as social status, money, physical appearance, etc.

But the love they are referring to, at least the love that they tell us about, is neither a psychological bond nor a sexual desire: it is a recognition of the other person's moral, political, or professional qualities and cooperation in common or parallel tasks. Love is, it seems, the possibility of re-discovering the other in a universal code acknowledged by the whole society, where "you"⁹ and "I" are no longer needed since "we" are in harmony. Today's Chinese speak less of love (*aiging*) than of "mutual understanding" (*liaojie*).

With the Great Leap Forward (1958), discussions about the family cease and an exaltation of community life, of the camaraderie of the working community, replaces it.

The peoples' commune is considered the "basic unit of society," as "the microcosm of the communist commune," because it is formed by the union of "industry, agriculture, commerce, teaching, and the army." The family seems to melt into this microcosm, the more so once the Great Leap Forward calls for the liberation of new labor forces, and it is under this pretext that a campaign to "liberate women from their domestic duties" is launched. This demand, which is, strictly speaking, feminist, is now considered an "urgent necessity of the whole socialist productive system" and is consequently "at the same time a demand of male members."¹⁰ It is less a matter of liberating women, then, as the Chinese suffragettes or even certain suggestions by the Jiangxi Soviet would have had it, than of liberating the "working capacity of women": "Freed from the distraction of small family tasks, [they] can therefore

9. *Tu* instead of the more distant *vous* (translator).

10. See Guang Feng's article, "Brief Considerations on the Grandiose Historical Meaning of the Peoples' Communes," *Zhexue Yanjiu*, vol. 5 (1958), translated from the Chinese by Stuart Schram in *La "Révolution permanente" en Chine* (Paris: Mouton, 1963).

advance production and accomplish 'militarization' in a more positive manner, strengthening their sense of discipline."¹¹ Even if excesses of this type were corrected by Mao's personal affirmation of the need to maintain the family, it is certain that up to now, as I observed during my trip, the theme of women's liberation is generally understood as a liberation of the working capacity of women. The anti-Confucian theme of change in the family hierarchy (between father and son, husband and wife, etc.) is only touched on for the moment and would be hard to deepen without a psychological and sexual approach.

An antifamily tendency, but very different from that of the Jiangxi era, is therefore heard during the Great Leap Forward. Since there is need for women's working capacity, and since nurseries, homes for the aged, and public dining halls can be had, of what use is the family? The Chinese Youth newspaper, *Zhongguo Qingnian*, of December 27, 1958, takes up this argument and replies to it: "The Peoples' Communes are not going to eliminate the family system. They have decided to abolish the patriarchal system inherited from the past, in order to construct in its place a democratic united family." Mao seems once more to be the inspiration for this moderating response; he thinks the Americans, notably Dulles, are accusing the peoples' communes of wanting to abolish the family, hence "it must be known that the patriarchal system ceased to exist in capitalist society a long time ago, and that this is a sign of capitalist progress. Yet we have gone a step further, by establishing a democratic and united family, which is generally rare in capitalist society. It is only in the future, when the socialist revolution has been won and the capitalist system of exploitation of man by man has been eliminated, that it will be possible to create such families in a universal way." Acknowledging that day-care centers, public cafeterias, etc., are also capitalist inventions, Mao insists that their role under socialism is not (yet?) to replace the family, but ". . . to facilitate the construction of socialism and the liberation of the human personality."¹²

We shall risk interpreting this declaration as follows. First of all, the Western patriarchal family has one clear superiority in comparison with the Chinese patriarchal family. Next, the new "democratic and united" Chinese family is utilizing certain modern trappings of the Western capitalist family which objectively represent progress. Last, if modern China attempts to make "a step forward" in relationship to the West, it will be effective in the long run if, and only if, the socialist revolution is realized. Meanwhile, the innovations (nurseries, cafeterias, etc.) aim to free the personality and integrate it into work having a communal, suprafamilial interest but not in any way to threaten the principle of the family. Prudence—a step backward from the utopian experimentation

11. See the article mentioned above.

12. According to the text of the "Resolution on Problems concerning the Peoples' Communes," in *Renmin Ribao*, December 10, 1958.

of the 1930s, a “minimum program” of a modest realism—on the other hand seems to be the line along which local interpretations of the ideology have revealed excessively collectivist and familialist tendencies.

The theme of the family returned in 1962, after a plenum of the central committee which launched a “movement for socialist education.” A counterblow to the Great Leap Forward and its tendency to bury the family in communes, this new drive fosters family relationships and wages the struggle on two levels. On the one hand, to the extent that the state and communes cannot assume burdens as important as those of caring for children and the aged, the existence of the family is still required to fill this specific economic need. On the other hand and at the same time, care must be taken that the family does not lead to “familialism.” Therefore, it is important to resume the dialectic of class struggle in the family—to discuss the contradictions of parent/child, feudal/bourgeois influence, etc.

There is an interesting investigation of fiction in Peoples' China during the period 1962–66 by Ai-li S. Chin, based on 232 short stories published in the literary magazine *Renmin Wenxue*.¹³ It illuminates the dilemma that the necessity to strengthen the family for economic reasons and the tendency to combat familial nepotism for ideological reasons constitute at this time. Of all the short stories published, sixty-two deal with parent/child problems, twenty-eight with husband/wife relationships, and seventy-seven with the relationships between young girls and boys. The fundamental axis through which the ideological preoccupations (economic, political, or ethical discussed on a national scale) pass is the father-son axis. For the first time since China began to modernize, the father once again appears as a positive authority figure (*yan-fu*), whom one must obey. In ten short stories, the father embodies the proper point of view and serves as an example to the sons. One curious element we were to find developed elsewhere during the course of our journey: when the father and son cling to an ideology judged to be bourgeois and reactionary, it is a girl—the son's sweetheart—who represents the good way. Not only is it the other generation but the other sex and the other family (i.e., a young female “outsider”) which embody, in eleven short stories, the revolutionary cause. When the mother/son relationship plays a role the mother represents good sense, but it is above all social because the mother is a productive person who puts the interests of society above those of the family. This does not keep her from ruling the household, having her say in the choice of a daughter-in-law, and even talking back when the son wants to leave his father's (mother's?) house with his wife. Echoes of the old Confucian family, tinted with “matrilineal” survivals, are also found in the

13. See Ai-li S. Chin, “Family Relations in Modern Chinese Fiction,” in *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society*, ed. M. Freedman (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1970).

father/daughter relationship: an authoritarian one, yet more affectionate than any other family tie. Finally, the most tense relationship is between mother and daughter: it seems supplementary to the ideological problems officially discussed (economic and political drives, etc.), for it concerns the contradiction between the old ethical values and the emancipation of women—a contradiction rarely discussed officially in depth. The daughter, for example, rejects the mother's prudence and any interference in the choice of a husband. (Are there in addition to these problems those archaic and intense rivalries between women which in the West produce our Electras, appropriating the mother and suppressing her for the glory of the father? Chinese literature is not explicit on this.) The dilemmas of the emancipation of young women also appear in their relations with men. Socially independent, more sexually, intellectually, and politically aware than men of the same generation, young girls must at the same time take into account the morality operating in the family, which still brings three generations together and quickly rejects signs of emancipation. Modesty, a long wait before marriage, "understandings" rather than love, but also an exclusivism in the affectional relationships (no friendship between "my" man and "another woman") mark the apparent psychology of the young woman that the literature of this epoch presents.

The role of the family during the Cultural Revolution, and since 1966, is more difficult to perceive and even more to summarize. The texts do not deal with it explicitly. One can schematically say that anything that once used to be a question of *jurisdiction* (a concise question, even though a matter of socialist and Chinese jurisdiction) now becomes a question of *communist morality*, thus a problem of permanent contradiction, of discussion, and of ideological choice dictated by political circumstance. It would seem plausible for family ties to have been weakened during that period if only for two reasons: on the one hand, the Red Guard's departure from their homes, the vast wandering of these young people throughout the country and their communal life, accompanied by an explosion of sexual taboos and a certain underlying freedom of mores beneath an apparent political austerity; on the other hand, the criticism of revisionism which often led to furious discussions within families, parents generally being committed to the preservation of the status quo and to a Liu Shaoqi type of prudence while the young, hell-bent on moving forward, took advantage of the opportunity to undermine parental authority. Or so I was told by Chang Quingmei, an old working woman of Shanghai.

During the resistance against Japan Mao had noted that the Communists would never conquer the adversary without the support of women. The different phases of the socialist revolution that followed would seem to corroborate his view: there is no concrete achievement if one does not take advantage of the "revolutionary potential" or the

“working force” that women comprise, and, still more, if one does not “raise women to leadership positions.” Constantly affirmed, spectacularly realized in various echelons of social and political life—in agriculture, industry, science, education, medicine, and the ranks of the Party—the promotion of women still leaves something to be desired. The editorial in *Renmin Ribao* of March 8, 1974 entitled “Women Should Become Active” reminds us that “we must form, in so far as it is possible, women leaders so that they may be suitably represented in managerial groups and play an effective role at different levels [and] we must make a determined effort so that women are not victims of discrimination, excluded from certain domains or even mistreated.” Despite incontestable successes in this domain, it became clear to us that much still remains to be done for the directives granting women leadership positions to become a reality. At Textile Plant Number Four in Northwest China, in Xi’an, out of 6,380 workers 58 percent are women. But only 39.7 percent of the supervisory staff are women; women make up only 30 percent of the technical personnel; and there is not a single woman engineer. Peking University currently has 3,000 students for 2,500 professors, because of the teaching reform now in progress, plus 5,000 workers, peasants, and soldiers recruited in 1974 who pursue studies along with their work. Only a third are women. The female officials I met are generally vice-presidents of administrative councils or union leaders (except in a primary school run by women and in the The Orient Is Red factory at Luoyang where the Revolutionary Committee has a woman vice-president), jobs of relatively secondary importance in comparison with the presidencies or directorships of revolutionary committees. In the The Orient Is Red factory at Luoyang, of the fifty members of the Revolutionary Committee (of whom seventeen are permanent), there are two permanent and three ordinary members who are women, plus the one woman vice-president; a great advance, but still insufficient when compared with the proportion of women workers there (27.4 percent out of 23,000). Yet this situation, which a current campaign aims to further improve, already implies immense progress for China and is particularly impressive compared with the percentage of women exercising social and political responsibility in the Western world. Of the 170 members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party elected at the Ninth Congress in 1969, there are twenty-three women: they are workers, peasants, representatives of national minorities, party officials, presidents or vice-presidents of revolutionary committees, a “red” intellectual from Peking, and, of course, the “veterans” we have already talked about—Cai Chang and Deng Yingchao. Just one woman is a member of the political section of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party—Jiang Qing, President Mao’s third wife.

We are no longer at the time just after the Liberation when it was a question of granting “the head wife of the family of X” or “the mother of

Y" her own name. Now everyone quotes Mao's phrase: "Times have changed, man and woman are equals. What man can achieve, woman can as well." And, given the circumstances he is speaking of, this is not false. Chinese socialism has endowed the feminine "me" with such an ideal that one may wonder whether the very notion of the socialist self was not created for women. The story of the "Girls of Iron" is a splendid illustration. In 1960, after many unsuccessful tries, a worker on the oil field at Daqing (Taching) struck the first successful well; he was nicknamed the "Man of Iron." In 1963 natural disasters devastated Dazhai (Tatchai), located in the middle of the Taihang Mountains, and twenty-three young girls aged fourteen to eighteen, all secondary school students, formed a shock troop under the direction of Zhao Sulan, the daughter of poor peasants. Under very difficult conditions they planted new saplings one by one on the tens of acres of fields; they were nicknamed the "Iron Girls" of Dazhai. The group still exists, and its example is spreading: the Xiyang district has 457 teams with 5,200 Girls of Iron. The Man of Iron has found disciples among young female oil workers also. In 1970, in the thick of the Cultural Revolution and after a march toward Peking where they were greeted by Mao, several young girls about twenty years old made up the first team to extract oil in Daqing: "We must take our example from the 'Man of Iron,' cope with difficulties, and get our oil wells working ahead of schedule," declared the team, which was undergoing some very rigorous physical endurance tests. The same ideal of physical endurance characterizes the numerous feminine teams (often dubbed "the 8th of March")¹⁴ which maintain high-tension electric lines in the Pearl River delta in South China, or the first feminine fishing-boat crew at Changze Island near the Liaoning Peninsula in the Northeast, captained by a young girl.

There are no women in the Chinese Peoples' Army; they participate in it only as medical, administrative, or liaison personnel. In contrast, the peoples' militia enrolls women, particularly many young girls. During our trip, however, we did not see a single armed woman in the towns or the country; in fact, we saw very few military people in general.

The call for intellectual effort is added to that for physical endurance: housewives set up electronic apparatus, young peasant women become "barefoot doctors," female students make advances in biological and chemical research. And, now that the time of Mao's "little red book" is finished, all women devote an hour twice a week to the study of classic Marxist works. An effort is asked of the whole country to learn Marxist theory at its sources. No one could be indifferent to the sight of these women and girls who even yesterday did not know how to read or write but who today are reading *The Critique of the Gotha Program*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *State and Revolution*, and even *Materialism and Empirio-*

14. In honor of International Women's Day (translator).

Criticism in the original texts. We, incorrigible Westerners, want them to say something original about these works too quickly. A utopian expectation, this is not yet the problem.

The actual problem is to open the production and political networks to the feminine population by giving it an ideal that may serve as a common standard for all men and women to recognize their usefulness, feel wanted and "legitimized." That this feeling of "legitimacy" is needed not only to construct socialism but, above all, to extract the female body from the polymorphic sensuality which it enjoys with such banal complacency, without mentioning the aggressive violence or the psychosis that lies in wait, we in the West know all too well. For this feeling of legitimacy to take the shape of obedience to a paternal authority is only logical in a society that has been patriarchal for thousands of years. And, after all, perhaps it also prevents the erection of a modern matriarchal authority, of a "women's power." The least that might be said about this is that one can scarcely see how it would be better than that of the fathers. Thus, when I read that a Girl of Iron commanding a boat is about to lose not just the rudder but her very self-control, that "Old Che" comes to her aid, and that in future she will "humbly rely on the advice of experienced fishermen," I tell myself that if this simple story were to teach young Chinese women that nothing is everything and that "woman power" does not exist (any more than man power), this at least would be a first step in a long march of their own.

Mao seems to raise the same cautionary note when he says: "I have never approved of men who let their wives manage their business affairs. Above Lin Biao there was Ye Qun who ran his office. When the four members of the group wanted to request something of Lin Biao, they had to go through her."¹⁵ A large part of the campaign against Lin Biao was aimed precisely at his familialism and self-effacement before his wife. Was this a classical mistrust of women or a rejection of the seductive effect that power might have on women?

Traumatized by centuries of "phallic power," it is hard for us here (in the West) to give this "principle" its place as a simple, abstract limit which is necessary because it has a structuring function. Either one exalts this principle as an unsurpassable, fundamental, and absolute value (a right-wing position), or one denies it with anarchistic rage or with the naiveté of spontaneous humanism (a left-wing position). Some psychoanalysts try to persuade people that this manifestation of power (call it paternal, phallic, or symbolic) is an intrinsic and necessary limit of the social animal; that since paranoia aspires to this power or is absorbed by it paranoia ultimately tests the conditions of existence in a society; that it is, in other words, coextensive with that society. Yet, as soon as one makes them see that this "structural manifestation of power" is politics,

15. Stuart Schram, ed., *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed, Talks and Letters: 1956-1971* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Pelican Books, 1974), p. 298.

psychoanalysts recoil in fright and prefer to talk about the "sacred" (because power is more garbed this way?). How embarrassing it is to hear such things!

In China, this social machination appears to be more stripped to the bone than elsewhere. The powerful matrilineal filiation and the Confucianism, which contains its effects, are not for naught. These masses take pleasure in repeating what seem to us to be "stereotyped slogans." But yesterday these women did not know how to speak or write, and today the "slogans" allow them to belong to an immense community through which they escape from their mother-father, yet without vanishing into the ideal abstraction of the Word. For the "stereotype" is made up of gestures, tones, "designs," bodies. . . . These women brandishing paint brushes, machine guns, and hammers, dressed like men, more and more put in charge of men, but surrounded also by a gentle childlike community, with rounded, relaxed bodies. . . . That power is politics, and vice versa they know, and all their apparent desires want, aspire to, and identify with this power. Women more so than anyone else. Yet, up to now at least, "power" does not seem to be *entrenched*, bureaucratic, and untouchable: successive cultural revolutions attack it, disturb it, harass it. Aspiring to power, women are among the most active in overthrowing it, are always on both sides of that strategy, of that "one blow of *yin*—one blow of *yang*" which organizes the logic of power in Peoples' China. Will this alternation last? By the application of what strategy? How long can the ideology continue to shake power on the spot, all the while prohibiting mention of desires at work in the "other stage," the one where, through the family and the "bedroom," those released energies are socialized so early in tone, gesture, and writing, yet are so aggressive when campaigns, accusations, and struggles burst forth? Or will one witness the day when this movement stops, when power ossifies, and when the "feminine condition" may be no more enviable if women were in charge than if they were oppressed? Confronted with the silence of a village square, these are more questions from our shores, their answers suspended for the future.

For the moment at least, despite the majestic Stanislavski-style poses women assume on posters or in the theaters, the trend does not seem to me to be the establishment of power with the aid of women who from former slaves would become the new directors of a new order. Moreover, theater, film, or operas in which a heroic ideal is proposed beneath the features of a heroine—none of the entertainments we saw had a hero—present women as catalyzers of dramatic situations, as the revealers of truths that society conceals from itself, but never as the miraculous agents of success. Women begin, unleash their efforts, suffer, are ignorant, learn, fail, until there is intervention by a Party representative: an artificial apparition who puts an end to the drama and, of course, brings about a happy ending which justifies the pioneer heroine

but which seems nonetheless artificial (in our eyes at least). Is this a definitive submission to a paternal, political “ideal of the self,” to “power”? Or is it the maintenance, by this political manifestation, of an ephemeral boundary against the permanent discontent, the “not enough” and “not that” of feminine desire—handrails, a wall against which the countervailing anarchy may lean?

In every Chinese theater, shows display this heroism mixed with weakness; it is disarming and thus even more desirable than the power that comes to aid its self-realization.

In *The Girl with the White Hair*, by the ballet company at Xi'an, a young peasant girl, persecuted by the local lord, tortured by his Confucian mother, flees to the mountain. With hair turned white from pain and solitude, hallucinated by abandonment and suffering, she encounters at last revolutionary friends who triumph over the feudal people. The true hero of the Revolution is this ruined heroine. The militants with guns who seize power for her (and for the people) seem like skillful but abstract technicians, agents of an impersonal gesture of which she is the desirable pole and not the dominating figure.

Also at Xi'an there is *The Mountain of the Azaleas*, an opera in the *qing chang* (a pure, local chant) style. Tense voices, exploding from the glottis of male singers, blend guttural outburst with hoarse complaint, broken by the effort of expulsion, of violence. It would be hard to imagine anything more *yang*, accompanied moreover by jerky motions: thighs abruptly raised, thumps, stiff pirouettes. This virile universe is dominated by a weak woman, accepted only because she has been sent by the Communist party. She organizes their discontent, orients their anarchism toward some precise, realizable, mass goals; she even protects the “bad guys”—“brigands” whom the men, deluded by the official ethics, are ready to reject—an act that would make them unconscious accomplices of the very law that oppresses them all. No matter that the peasant leader is a man; the soul and the brain of the struggle—during the confrontation as well as in prison, the instigator of the plot's realistic activity, of its stratagem, of the relationship that turns combatants into a group of friends—is a woman.

Then there was *The Department Store That Marches toward the Sun* at the Opera of the Seven Sunbeams in Luoyang. The time is the present and the style the strange patchwork mode of the Peking Opera—a blend of frozen poses from the old-fashioned concubine opera with the mincing gestures of Bolshoi-style toework, and exalted gazes following abruptly raised arms, after a blow on the back, up toward infinity. (None of this, however, compares with the admirable and highly applauded *qing chang*, *The Mountain of the Azaleas*.) A young girl rebels against her father, a department-store manager, who wants her to become a student. At the suggestion of the Communist party, she decides to become a merchant wandering through the countryside and the mountains, thus

bringing consumer goods to the people. A few “bad guys” are opposed to the idea, but her decision carries. Absentminded, inexperienced, frail—a woman, in other words—she is attacked by thugs. Her cart smashed, the heroine is disgraced. Slandered by anonymous letters, accused of irresponsibility by her father, shunned by the one who might have been her friend—but no, he is a comrade seduced by conformist thinking whom she eventually wins over to her cause, that of serving the people rather than settling in town—the heroine cannot clear herself and becomes a heroine in fact only because the party secretary discovers the true culprits.

The Mountain of the Green Pine is a 1974 film (produced by the film collective of the north) that reproduces the time of Liu Shaoqi,¹⁶ currently interpreted as an attempt to restore capitalism by a return to the “individual ownership of land,” a “free market,” etc. A rich peasant, in disguise, has usurped the function of cart driver to a brigade. A poor peasant suspects this “doubledealer” of evil doings and organizes a training course for young cart drivers. The most active of the pupils, a young girl, aided by the party secretary, a retired soldier, ends by seizing the hypocrite’s whip—a symbol of power. Rather imprudent, however, overconfident, and lacking sufficient strength or skill in her new profession, she unconsciously permits the villains to destroy her work: the horse dies, the cart is overturned. The intervention of the old cart driver and the party secretary are necessary once again before the cause set in motion by the young girl’s impatience and overwhelming desire for action can triumph in the end. The young girl is a heroine of desire, of audacity, of revolt against authority. To her one owes the beginnings of change, not its attainment.

Next to the young girl, the mother or the wife, when she appears in these spectacles, represents the traditional picture of woman. Either she is the very docile servant of her “bad guy” husband or else a gentle collaborator with her revolutionary husband. But she is never the initiator of new ideas on her own except (like the “bad guy’s” wife in *The Mountain of Green Pine*) by her disagreement with her husband—by her “bad character”—the implicit sign of dissatisfaction and rejection, the only traditional form of feminine expression.

Comparing these “characters” and their relationship to the 1962–66 period (whose literary reflection has been analyzed by Ai-li S. Chin) one can see that the wind of the Cultural Revolution is past. The father is no longer the authoritarian (*yan-fu*) figure resuscitated from the past. The action begins with a revolt against the father, the desire of the young (girls) to leave the family and the frozen social framework in which the family is contained. It is, moreover, not a son but a daughter who leads the attack against the real father by relying on a “symbolic father” (the

16. A period preceding the 1965 Cultural Revolution (translator).

Party). There is no more discussion among women (mother/daughter): the emancipation of the daughter is a political emancipation in which she identifies her revolt (as a woman?) with the people's discontent vis-à-vis the new bourgeoisie or the bureaucracy. There is no longer a peculiarly feminine set of problems (sex, feelings, marriage) over which she and the mother might have met. There is no longer any question of intersubjective or interfamilial relationships. Sublimation is intense; it harnesses impatient desires but suggests nothing of the libidinal, the psychological, or the imaginary residue which has not been seized by political sublimation. It is as if that haven for the Imaginary which the family represents had been consumed and the desires of the community, represented by the desire of a young girl, were invested, with no left-overs although not without lapses or dramas, directly into politics. If this is not the reality, it is at least the image that the current ideology proposes.

Bertolt Brecht, precociously "Chinese" in his socialism (see his *Me-Ti*¹⁷ for example), noticed that the failings of Eastern governments were not temporary errors or the shortcomings of some personality with or without a cult but that "there was something missing." Since I have been educated in a "popular democracy," have benefited from its advantages, submitted to its censures, and have emerged, insofar as one can and probably not without a few "birthmarks," I have the impression that what is missing in the "system" is the stubborn refusal to know that there is something missing. More concretely, it is the stubborn refusal to admit that social harmony—inasmuch as it is possible—is sustained by desire, by its expenditure, by eroticism; by a "negative" that can take the shape of either "sex manuals" or "the sacred" but which exists there, underneath. Try ignoring it and it will surge to the glossy surface of politics to form a *Gülag Archipelago*. In China today there is no "sacred" nor any discussion of desires. One's immediate reaction is to look for the "archipelagos"; they must be there somewhere, well camouflaged beneath good Confucian manners and the elegance of the written word. This, as they say, is certainly the big question.

It is possible, however, that this "other stage," which in our society leads to the "sacred," the "erotic," or the "totalitarian" when one is unaware that it is missing, is constantly present in the organization of the Chinese world, underlying all, though imperceptible to us—just as Taoism is the discreet but permanent lining of all of Chinese life. Taoism, as Maspero¹⁸ has shown, only became a Church rather late, and, at all times, imbued Chinese life by associating the "erotic" and the "sacred,"

17. Bertolt Brecht's *Me-Ti: Buch der Wendungen* was modeled on the great Chinese classic of the same name, *The Book of Changes*. Subtitled "a philosophical, political, and ethical breviary of instructions on social attitudes," it was published only after Brecht's death as *Me-Ti: Buch der Wendungen*, by Suhrkamp, in Frankfurt, 1969 (translator).

18. See F. Maspero, *Le Taoïsme et les religions chinoises* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

without its being possible to isolate either one of them by itself. Will this permanent "lining" of the sociopolitical life preserve Chinese society from the totalitarian blindness of our own Western rationalisms, until, with the help of economic development, a new discursive realization of familial, feminine, and masculine will be discovered out of "what is missing"?

To Risk a Renaissance (Conclusion)

When the hare and his mate
are racing over the earth
who can tell which is the male
and which the female?

[From a Chinese folk song]

Chinese women, apparently so little different from Chinese men, these Chinese women, whose ancestors knew better than anyone the secrets of erotic art, now so sober and so absorbed in their gray-blue suits, relaxed and austere, wield their paint brushes, stand before their lathes or in the arms of their children (not more than two, according to family planning), "the pill" in their pockets . . . One can say that they "censure the sexual difference," and send them back to the archaism or the ignorance that our well-known prototypes exhibit, from Electra to the suffragettes. And what if this reproach, insofar as it is one, were to have no meaning except in our framework of paternal dominance, where any trace of a "central mother figure" is completely lost? What if their tradition, on condition one could strip it of its hierarchical-bureaucratic-patriarchal weight, allowed no more separation between two metaphysical entities (Men and Women); no more symbolic difference, that is, outside of the biological difference, except a subtle differentiation on both sides of the biological barrier, structured by the recognition of a social law to be assumed in order ceaselessly to be contested?

If any society, in order to exist as a whole, needs to assume if not to recognize the symbolic paternal function (not a real papa, but an interdict, a law, a structure), in China, because of the active traces of the two familial models (matrilineal and patrilineal), this function is assumed by *women also*. This is what permits women, when the economic needs of social development are not so oppressive as to reduce them to the status of social refuse, slaves, or mutilated martyrs (as was true under feudalism, in the overwhelming majority of cases)—this is what permits them, even with the above-mentioned factors, to function as the most solid support of the social order, of its gestation, of its reform, and indeed of its revolution. A function which, in short, is not so different in

its social effect from that of the Chinese man, the real father, since he consequently sees himself dispossessed of his absolute appropriation of *yang* and endowed with a rather good bit of *yin*. When communism in China is occupied with removing from its male and female members the appetite for consumer goods, the profit motive, the mediocre well-being of individualism (traits denounced as bourgeois, economist, or revisionist), it is clear that it is attacking pragmatist, substantialist, psychologist tendencies—all considered “feminine” in a patriarchal society. But in addressing itself thus to women, it calls upon their capacity to assume the symbolic function (the structuring constraint, the laws of society). This capacity, too, has a traditional foundation, all the deeper because it embraces the byways and the antecedents of Confucianism.

Yet, *power* (which I described above as a paternal function) assumed (and not *represented*) by a woman is already power which has a body, and a body which knows it has power: this is a symbolic contract, an economic constraint, but also an instinct, a desire, and a contradiction. It is power which is perpetually questioned—*unrepresentable power*.

So that when Mao launched women after students during the Cultural Revolution,¹⁹ when today women, too, are placed in positions of authority, must it not be in order to show that *power* in a society is not to be abolished (that would be nonsense or poetry, another problem altogether) but that power *does not have to be represented* and, moreover, cannot be represented any longer? Neither by a chief, a princely body incarnating the law for those with feudal imaginations (oh Hegel!); nor by a social contract which makes the interests of private property and its bourgeois development of productive forces function (oh! Goddess Reason, wife of Robespierre, mother of the Terror); nor by means of the more or less cold violence of one party arbitrarily instituting its arbitrariness against all the “others”—a negation of the social contract, a return of the repressed body in the torments of prison camps (Stalin, and the rest).

Nothing is easier in China today than to see one of these three forms of power or the three of them together. Can Mao not easily be taken for a feudal lord, the Chinese ideology for a flat and restrictive positivism, and the Chinese Communist party for an offspring of dogmatism? Nothing is plainer, in fact, on the condition that one not take into account the fact that a society is a complex whole, that its ethics are determined by its family structure perhaps more than by anything else, and that therefore it depends directly on the organization and the function of the sexual difference. Old Hegel was the last to realize this. Since his time, the “human sciences” have specialized and compartmentalized and have abandoned ethics. The sexualized body has found refuge only in

19. An enlargement, in Mao's own hand calligraphy, of the Chinese characters for “*On the Women of China*” appears in an appropriate bright red as the cover design of the French edition of Ms. Kristeva's book (translator).

the twilight zone of psychoanalysis, removed from concerns of the day. If, on the other hand, one considered the family, women, and the sexual difference in the way they determine a social ethic, one could say after seeing their problems in China that the basic question there is the building of a society whose active power is represented by no one. No one can appropriate it for himself if no one is excluded from it, not even women—those last slaves, necessary supports to the power of masters—whose separation from power assures that it is representable and is to be represented (by fathers, by legislators).

It is a power, therefore, that no one represents, not even women, but which is recognized by and for everyone, assumed and exercised by and for everyone, man and woman; men and women practicing it only in order to criticize it, throw it back, make it move. And this should explain why the “tribunal” is replaced in China by “peoples’ assemblies.” There would be no more *manifestations* of the Law per se if each subject, man and woman, were to assume the Law for him or herself and recreate it in a permanent confrontation with his or her practice and discourse with others. Could that occur in every action, at every moment? Is this utopia? Is this an eventuality to dream of for the future, while in the present nothing has been able to transcend the rational rigor of bourgeois law and the ethic that goes with it? Is this an eventuality just the same, since our system is cracking and there, in China, another system is being built, setting out from quite another tradition and other presuppositions?

Many of the phenomena in China observed herein keep one from accepting this hypothesis and allow one to think that China is still going through a period of transition, if not of failures, in which certain emancipations are obtained at the price of prohibitions that may prove costly. Other phenomena lead one to think that the route has been taken in China toward a socialism without God and without Man. This will accompany, at a distance, the unprecedented, and still perilous renaissance, of a new humanity gathering its energies here in the West.

University of Paris