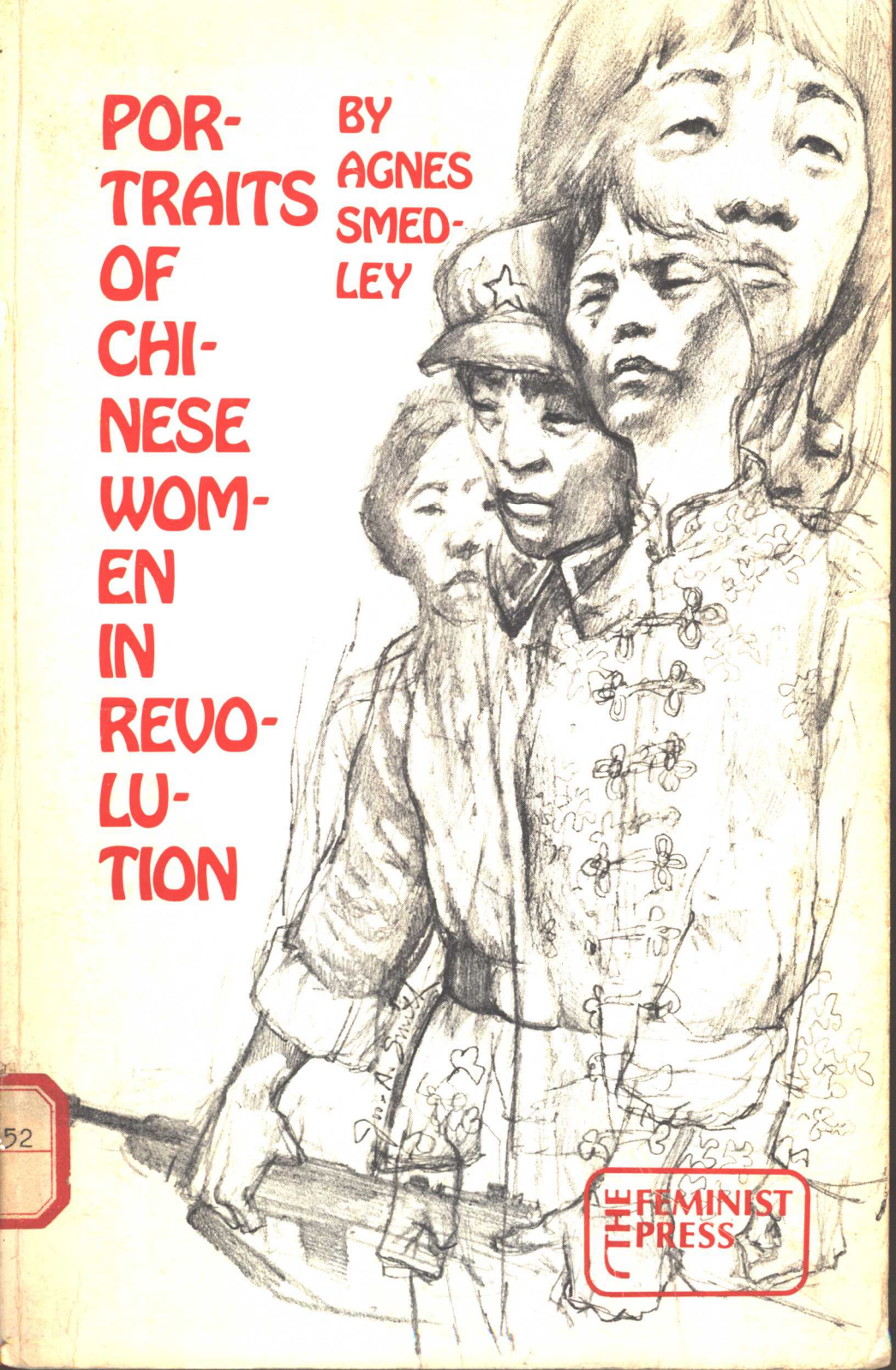
PORTRAITS OF CHINESE WOMEN IN REVOLUTION

BY AGNES SMEDLEY



THE FEMINIST PRESS

PORTRAITS OF CHINESE WOMEN IN REVOLUTION

by Agnes Smedley

edited with an introduction
by Jan MacKinnon and Steve MacKinnon;
with an afterword by Florence Howe

THE FEMINIST PRESS

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data:
Smedley, Agnes, 1890-1950
Portraits of Chinese women in revolution.
1. Women—China—History. 2. Smedley, Agnes, 1890-1950.
I. Title
HQ1737.S56 1976 301.41'2'0951 76-18896
ISBN 0-912670-44-4

With special acknowledgments to the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for a grant that helped finance the publication of this book, and to Frances Boehm, Joan Kelly-Gadol, Amy Swerdlow, and Rose Rubin for their kind assistance.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to:
Vanguard Press, Inc. and the estate of Agnes Smedley for permission to reprint material from *China Fights Back* by Agnes Smedley, copyright © 1938 by Vanguard Press, Inc., copyright © 1965 by Chu Teh; *China's Red Army Marches* by Agnes Smedley, copyright © 1934, 1961 by Vanguard Press, Inc.; *Chinese Destinies: Sketches of Present-Day China* by Agnes Smedley, copyright © 1933, 1961 by Vanguard Press, Inc.
Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and the estate of Agnes Smedley for permission to reprint material from *Battle Hymn of China* by Agnes Smedley, copyright © 1943, 1970 by Agnes Smedley.

Art Director/Designer: Susan Trowbridge
This book was typeset in Journal Roman by O.B.U., New York, New York, with Souvenir and Hobo heads supplied by Nassau Typographers, Plainview, New York. It was printed on 60 # offset by R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Chicago, Illinois.
The photos used in the photographic portraits are reproduced through the courtesy of Aino Taylor (page 192) and the Arizona State University Archives (pages 194-203). The cover illustration is by Joseph A. Smith.

First edition

The Feminist Press offers alternatives in education and in literature. Founded in 1970, this nonprofit, tax-exempt educational and publishing organization works to eliminate sexual stereotypes in books and schools, providing instead a new (or neglected) literature with a broader vision of human potential. Our books—high quality paperbacks—include reprints of important works by women writers, feminist biographies of women, and nonsexist children's books. Curricular materials, bibliographies, directories, and a newsletter provide information and support for women's studies at every educational level. Our Inservice projects help teachers develop new methods to encourage students to become their best and freest selves. Through our publications and projects we can begin to recreate the forgotten history of women, begin to create a more humane and equitable society for the future. For a catalogue of all our publications, please write to us.

INTRO-DUC-TION

By Jan MacKinnon
and Steve MacKinnon

With the reissue of her autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth* (The Feminist Press, 1973), and with the resurgence of American interest in China, Agnes Smedley (1892-1950) has become a vital voice to a new generation. To those who know her as a writer, a participant in revolutionary movements, and a vigorous feminist, Agnes Smedley has been an inspiration for their own struggles. She exposed prison conditions in

Portions of this introduction first appeared in "Agnes Smedley: A Working Introduction," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 7, no. 1 (January-March 1975): 6-11. The editors wish to give special thanks to Paul Lauter and Marcela Lozano for their help and to Arizona State University's Faculty Grants Committee for financial assistance.

the United States; worked to establish birth control clinics in Germany, India, and China; raised funds and helped organize the Indian revolutionary movement against the British; defended Chinese writers against persecution by Chiang Kai-shek; became a war correspondent of international stature; raised funds for Chinese war relief; nursed wounded guerillas of the Chinese Red Army; and at the end of her life fought McCarthyism in the United States. What Agnes Smedley wrote and experienced now emerges with new importance to others working for self-determination and a new social order.

Smedley's activism and her feminism grew out of her personal and class background. Born into the rural poverty of northern Missouri, Smedley moved as a child through the shacks of many poor western towns and mining camps. Her father, hard-drinking, disappointed, and illiterate, maintained a flair for storytelling—at least until his spirit was broken while he was a coal miner in the Rockefellers' Trinidad, Colorado, mines. Chained by children and overwork, her mother took in laundry until she died in her late thirties of malnutrition, exposure, and exhaustion. Reared on the romantic tales of Jesse James, on cowboy ballads, and on the economic realities which forced her to be hired out as a domestic at age twelve, Smedley was stamped by the fervent individualism of the Old West, and by a keen understanding of what making a living meant—especially for a woman. The family depended on a prostitute aunt to keep it from total destitution, a relationship of which Smedley was both proud and ashamed all her life. (One of her last interests before she died was a study of prostitution in England.) Fear of the degradation lower-class women encountered in the endless cycle of sex, childbearing, and child rearing, made concrete in the lives of her mother and aunt, haunted and motivated Smedley throughout her life.

Her mother instilled another dream, ever-present in the experience of working people: that of liberating herself through education. Rich local materials in the Southwest indicate that Smedley's *Daughter of Earth* accurately portrays the bitterness she encountered trying to realize this dream. Aside from the grammar schools she sporadically attended during her family's periods of stability, Tempe Normal School (now Arizona State University) provided in 1911-12 her first significant educational experience. She became editor of the school paper. Many of her well-written stories of this period are obviously autobiographical; some reemerged eighteen years later in *Daughter of Earth*. In Tempe, Smedley met her first husband, Ernest Brundin, and his sister, Thorburg. Both influenced her profoundly, although, as she wrote in the novel, her fears of sex and pregnancy, and the emotional agony of abortion, could lead only to divorce. At Tempe and later at San Diego State University (then San Diego Normal School) she advanced her education sufficiently to obtain a position teaching typing at the latter in 1914. She lost this position two years later because of her association with the Socialist party and with people who had been involved in San Diego's free speech movement of 1912, and possibly because of contacts with Indian nationalists. Jobless and seeking to deepen her political education, Smedley decided to move east to New York.

Her years in New York, 1917-20, reveal immense energy and commitment. While working as a secretary, she wrote for the Socialist party's newspaper, *The Call*, as well as for Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review*. She became more and more deeply involved with the Indian nationalist movement. During World War I, Indian nationalism was viewed by British and American authorities alike as a subversive movement, and its supporters in the United States as renegades, at best. British and United States intelligence operatives devel-

oped an intense interest in Smedley's activities, which they were to pursue for over three decades and across three continents. In March, 1918, Smedley and Saliendra Nath Ghose, a nationalist activist, were arrested in New York. The Espionage Act indictment charged them with stirring up rebellion against British rule in India and with representing themselves as diplomats. Wartime hysteria transformed the charge into part of a German plot against our British allies. After six months in the Tombs, Smedley was released on bail, raised in part by Margaret Sanger, since Smedley had also been charged with violating a local anti-birth-control law. In *The Call*, Smedley published "Cell Mates," sketches of four women prisoners with whom she did time. [1] Prison deepened her radicalism and generated even greater commitment to the Indian revolutionary movement. Even with the indictment still pending—it was not formally dropped until 1923—she edited a newsletter, *India News Service*, acted as executive secretary of Friends of Freedom for India, wrote, and raised money. [2]

By 1920, the combined efforts of British intelligence and the United States Department of Justice had largely succeeded in suppressing the Indian revolutionary movement in the United States. Smedley's thinking had also moved beyond the moderation of her earlier mentors, like Lala Rajpat Rai (the fatherly professorial figure in *Daughter of Earth*), toward a commitment to armed revolution in India. For such reasons she decided to move to Germany and to join a group called the Indian Revolutionary Committee of Berlin. The last section of *Daughter of Earth*, though set in the United States, depicts her German period of intense activity and trial.

Berlin was the hub of the overseas Indian freedom movement, and Smedley moved right at its center. Emma Goldman described her and an Indian companion in 1921:

> She was a striking girl, an earnest and true rebel, who seemed to have no other interest in life except the cause of the oppressed people in India. Chat[t]o [her Hindu friend] was intellectual and witty, but he impressed me as a somewhat crafty individual. He called himself an anarchist, though it was evident that it was Hindu nationalism to which he had devoted himself entirely. [3]

The "crafty" fellow whom Goldman did not like was Virendranath Chattopadhaya, long the organizer of and intellectual force behind the Berlin group. He became Smedley's common-law husband as well as her mentor in further study of Marxist theory. Ultimately, however, her relationship with Chatto (as he was usually called) shattered her personal and political life. M.N. Roy's depiction of Smedley in the classic sexist stereotype of the temptress illustrates the hostility which her relationship with Chatto bred among other Indian revolutionaries:

> . . . The famous revolutionary Chattopadhaya naturally commended himself for affection. She [Smedley] came over to Berlin and was known to have lived with Chattopadhaya for several years. It seems that she managed to poison Chatto's mind against me. In any case, she was the evil genius of the Indian revolutionary group. . . . But for her influence, Chatto, who was an intelligent and practical man, would have behaved differently. I learned in the course of time that she was heartily disliked by all the other members of the group because of her pretension to be a more passionate Indian patriot than the Indians themselves. . . . [4]

In *Daughter of Earth* and to friends in the 1940s Smedley gave her side of the story: not only had she worked to provide financial support, but she had slavish-

ly cooked and kept house for men who sat around talking about revolution at a distance. Moreover, other Indian revolutionaries recognized her positive contribution to the cause. Jawaharlal Nehru, for example, met Smedley in Berlin in 1926 and was sufficiently impressed to invite her to India after independence and to meet her in New York in 1949, more than twenty years later. Eventually, Smedley suffered a total nervous breakdown, for which writing *Daughter of Earth* was part of the therapy. Thereafter, while the personal and the political remained consciously meshed for her, Smedley would never again join a political organization nor become emotionally dependent on a man.

As had been the case in New York, Smedley's political involvements in Berlin and her educational pursuits extended beyond the Indian movement. She continued feminist activities, keeping in close personal touch with Margaret Sanger. She brought Sanger to Germany for a lecture tour in 1927, and was instrumental in opening Berlin's first birth control clinic in 1928. She also taught English and American studies at the University of Berlin, and persuaded the authorities there to accept her as a doctoral student in Indian history. She wrote numerous articles in German, some for academic journals, primarily on Indian history and on women. [5] She moved in the exciting intellectual circle of the German Left of the 1920s. Käthe Kollwitz was a friend and worked with Smedley translating and illustrating pamphlets on birth control. In 1928-29 Germany's most influential newspaper, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, for which figures like Berthold Brecht and Walter Benjamin wrote, serialized *Daughter of Earth* on its front page. By then, Smedley was in China, sending reports back to the *Zeitung*.

Smedley's psychological state when she arrived in China in early 1929 appears to have been precarious. She was

described at the time as mercurial, alternating between near-suicidal and paranoid moods, and moments of great compassion, mimicry, and humor. Quickly she became involved in the social and political movements of China, perhaps even more intensely than she had with India because now she saw and could directly identify with the women and poor of China. In *Yo Banfa*! Rewi Alley captures the quality of Smedley's involvement after a year in China:

> . . . She had asked to be shown some factories and we had just been around some of the shocking sweatshops which were all too common in the "model settlement" of Shanghai.
>
> I can still see her great eyes look at me intently over the table as I told her of some of the suffering, some of the tragedy, some of the denial of life I moved amongst in industrial Shanghai.
>
> With a short, bitter laugh, she in her turn told me of her first vivid impression of Shanghai, how she had seen a group of workers hauling goods from a wharf on a hand cart straining under the ropes in the "tiger heat" of Shanghai summer. How there came a tall bearded Indian policeman and beat them over their bare, sweating backs to clear them out of the way of a shiny black limousine in which an arrogant foreign official sat. How she felt that it was she herself who was being beaten by that policeman, the shame she felt at seeing one of the oppressed being so treated by another of the oppressed, and how she had said to herself, "This must be a place where much can be done by anyone with guts." [6]

Alley went on to tell her how he had finally been persuaded of the impossibility of reform under the old system; it had come about when a group of men who had been organizing silk filature workers were "crudely

executed at Wusih as Communist." Alley said, "It suddenly became very clear to me, that the only way was basic change. Agnes leaned forward and gripped my wrist. 'Then let's get along with the changing of it,' she said firmly."[7]

Out of such observations Smedley wrote a series of powerful reports for the *Zeitung* and for American magazines, many of which were collected in her first China book, *Chinese Destinies* (1933), some of which are reprinted in this volume. These early pieces make clear Smedley's power as a writer, and also the intensity which drew her more and more into activism. In 1931 she founded with Harold Isaacs the radical Shanghai periodical, *China Forum*, and in spring, 1932, she and Isaacs compiled a book, *Five Years of Kuomintang Reaction*, which was a bitter indictment of Chiang's government. By 1932 Smedley was subject to close surveillance and regular harassment by Kuomintang and foreign police in Shanghai. In 1932, along with Madame Sun Yat-sen and members of Academia Sinica, Smedley helped to form the League of Civil Rights in order to publicize to the outside world the absence of civil liberties under Chiang.[8] She worked closely with Madame Sun on this and other projects, although they eventually drifted apart because of personality conflicts. She tried unsuccessfully to establish a birth control clinic in Shanghai, as she had in Berlin, and she gathered material for her pioneering work on Mao and Chu Teh's Kiangsi Soviet, *China's Red Army Marches* (1934). This book was based on first-hand accounts by Communists like Red Army Commander Chou Chien-ping, who for a time had recuperated in her Shanghai apartment.

Smedley herself became seriously ill in 1933 and went to the Soviet Union to recuperate and to write *China's Red Army Marches*. After spending most of 1934 in the United States visiting family and endeavoring to find employment with United States newspapers

and periodicals, she returned to China. By December, 1936, she was in the northwestern city of Sian, reporting on the famous "Incident" in which Chiang Kai-shek was kidnapped by Marshal Chang Hsueh-liang and forced to agree to ally with the Communists and go to war against Japanese imperialism. Shortly thereafter she moved to Yenan, the Communist capital, and is credited with prodding the international correspondents in China to come there to see the "red bandits" for themselves. During the war with Japan, her powerful writing and her personal commitment to relieving the wounded helped in obtaining medical supplies from abroad. Her letters to America, sent with Mao's, brought Norman Bethune and other Western doctors to China, and her personal appeal, along with Chu Teh's, to Nehru, brought five doctors and medical supplies from India. She also worked to establish the Chinese Red Cross.

Smedley had a wide range of Chinese friends including economist Ch'en Han-sheng, major writers like Lu Hsun, Mao Tun, and Ting Ling; Shanghai political figures like Madame Sun Yat-sen; and Communist leaders like Chu Teh and Chou En-lai. Among Westerners in China Smedley was well known and well liked. Her friendships were extremely varied: radicals like Anna Louise Strong, Harold Isaacs, and Frank Glass; journalists like Edgar Snow, Nym Wales, Jack Belden, Randall Gould, and Freda Utley; the British ambassador, Sir Archibald Clark-Kerr; an Episcopal Bishop, Logan Roots; Hilda Selwyne-Clarke, wife of Hong Kong's medical director; YWCA worker, Maud Russell; and the leading United States military figure in China, General Vinegar Joe Stillwell and his marine military attaché, Evans Carlson. Clearly her acquaintances spanned the political spectrum. Smedley did not hesitate to write a chapter for a book edited by Madame Chiang Kai-shek (*China Shall Rise Again*) when she saw that it would be advantageous to aiding the Chinese wounded. But her

sympathies were entirely committed to the revolutionary cause led by the Chinese Communist Party, and especially to people like Red Army Commander Chu Teh, whose biography she was later to write. She was well acquainted on the Left; she had obtained her job on the *Frankfurter Zeitung* through Julian Gumpertz, then a member of the German Communist Party. Her early books on China were published in the United States by the Vanguard Press, and *China's Red Army Marches* was also published by the Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR as *Red Flood Over China*. On the other hand, she remained unwilling to have her work censored by Western Communist party people in China and she refused, during the late 1930s, to follow the party line of attacking only the Japanese imperialists and not Chiang Kai-shek. Some party activists found her individualistic and difficult; Smedley insisted she would be her own person.

In terms of her writing in the 1930s, perhaps the most important influence upon Smedley was Lu Hsun, the father of modern Chinese literature. She helped to translate his work; he translated hers. Lu Hsun's vernacular style and social realism reinforced Smedley's approach to writing. In 1934-35 Smedley lived with Lu Hsun and his wife, Hsu Kuang-p'ing, for almost a year and in 1936 they collaborated as editors of a book on Käthe Kollwitz. [9] Smedley was also close to Ting Ling, the well-known novelist and activist for women's causes, with whom Smedley corresponded until her death. It was with the help of feminists like Ting Ling that Smedley could portray so perceptively the condition of Chinese women in the 1920s and 1930s.

The oppression of women in traditional China is legendary. [10] In Smedley's stories we see it symbolized most often in the brutal practice of footbinding, the reduction of the adult foot to an elegant "Golden Lily," three

inches from heel to toe. With some regional and class variation, footbinding had been the scourge of Chinese women since the tenth century. Economically and socially, women lived as family slaves, though here again the form varied from class to class and region to region. Besides housework, childbearing, and child rearing, lower-class women in southern and central China worked productively in the fields, and in both North and South, women were the backbone of a well-developed cottage textile industry. Of course, such work was done under the direction of men. Often, as Smedley suggests, lower-class women were bought or sold as *mei-tsai*—household slaves. Upper-class women did not work, but neither did they own or inherit property. They could enjoy a life of luxury and pleasure as well as command over household management, but they remained playthings and/or tools of men, be they fathers, husbands, or sons. Marriage institutionalized the subordination of upper- and lower-class women to men. To begin with, all marriages were forced, with a bride leaving her home (the wealthier with a dowry) to live and work in the home of a stranger, her husband. Only within marriage, as a breeder of males, could a woman rise in status. Otherwise, as the old proverb went, "A woman married is like a pony bought—to be ridden or whipped at the master's pleasure." Infanticide of baby girls was common among the lower classes. Traditionally, the only escape for women was suicide, prostitution, or a Buddhist nunnery.

The revolutionary process in China, for women and men, began at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century, when the traditional mandarinate and the Ch'ing dynasty were shaken to their roots by a massive peasant revolt known as the Taiping revolution (1851-64). During this revolution, footbinding was outlawed. Among the combattants were all-women divisions led by Taiping women. Women shared work and property

equally with men. And women competed in the Taiping civil service examination system for places in the new Taiping bureaucracy. Eventually, overcome by superior firepower borrowed from the West, the Taipings were suppressed, but the seeds of revolution among the peasantry had been sown.

Simultaneous with the unsuccessful Taiping revolution came the onslaught of Western imperialism. Through gun-boat diplomacy and a series of wars (beginning with the Opium War of 1839-42), China was reduced to semi-colonial status by the end of the nineteenth century. It was this foreign threat, not the domestic problem of peasant unrest, that prompted upper-class Chinese to seek more drastic means to return themselves and China to the wealth and power of earlier days. By the turn of the century, reformers were moving beyond a simple borrowing of Western weaponry and technology toward an acceptance of Western social, political, and economic models for modernization. With this came an interest in women's rights. Prominent male reformers like K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao attacked footbinding and supported formal education for women. Footbinding was denounced as uncivilized and a symbol of China's backwardness in Western eyes; education for women was necessary if China was to become a strong modern nation state. China needed a larger and more sophisticated work force as well as educated mothers for upper-class sons.

What follows in the twentieth century, as Smedley documents in the stories in this volume, is a painful dialectic of revolutionary breakthrough countered by reactionary backlash and bloodbaths. In this way the revolution progressed, albeit slowly and tortuously, with women playing an increasingly important part. The first women revolutionaries appeared at the turn of the century. They were from the privileged classes, graduates of new educational institutions for women in China