

WOMEN OF CHINA
special series



HALF THE SKY



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WOMEN OF CHINA

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Foreword | 5 |
| The Stream of Life Flows On — The Story of Bingxin | 9 |
| Orphan to Worker | 23 |
| The Tempo of Directress Chen Yong | 31 |
| From “Xiao Dai” to Chief Engineer | 45 |
| Raptures of Devotion | 55 |
| An Unbreakable Civic Spirit | 67 |
| Women Teachers in Mountain Villages | 77 |
| Song of the Epoch — The Growth of a Peasant Woman | 91 |
| Ace Spiker Lang Ping | 103 |
| A Woman Photographer | 115 |
| My Wife Pando | 121 |
| A New Attempt to Cure Brain Cancer | 133 |
| She Works for Their Sight — A Dedicated Eye-Doctor | 143 |
| Was It a Life Without Love? — An Interview with the Painter Wang Shuhui | 157 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| An Expert Grass-Grower | 169 |
| More Than a Haircut | 177 |
| “I’m a Nurse” — On Wang Xiuying, Winner of the Nightingale Prize | 183 |
| A Woman Chemical Engineer | 191 |
| The Wei Junyi That I Know | 207 |
| Her Duty Towards Her Motherland | 217 |
| An Actress Behind the Scenes | 227 |
| She Is a University President | 235 |
| The Goal: 100-Plus — First China-Educated Woman Ph.D. | 243 |
| A Person of Wealth | 251 |
| A Textile Worker | 259 |
| Orchestra Conductress Zheng Xiaoying | 267 |
| Ahead of Time | 277 |
| An Archaeologist in Anyang | 281 |
| Pioneers | 290 |

Foreword

SINCE the liberation of China in 1949 the position of women in Chinese society has changed immensely. The opportunities of employment available to women today have forever changed the traditional view that men work outside the home in productive labor and are the "bread-winners" while women stay in and do the housework. Women have become involved in a wide variety of careers and studies including the most advanced branches of science and engineering. Many have become the leaders in their fields. And it can be truly said that "women hold up half the sky."

The short-biographies in this booklet show the determined characters and creative thought of twenty-some contemporary Chinese women. These women are involved in a wide-range of careers and are deeply devoted to their work.

Instead of pursuing personal fame, these women work for a higher goal—to rejuvenate China. It is for this noble cause that these women work with such dedication and perseverance. At times the burdens of their work become heavy and they miss not having enough leisure time to spend with their parents, husbands or children. Then they just need think of the good they are doing for the country by their work and for the society, in once

again showing, through their deeds, that women are equally intelligent and able as men, and their spirits are lifted.

Not a few stories in this booklet touch upon the support and concern given to the women by their husbands, including sharing the household work. These are not individual cases, for men and women are equals at home.

However, this does not mean that China is entirely free from the long traditions of discrimination against women. Although equality between men and women is one of the foundations of the laws and constitution of this country, the feudal ideas do not disappear easily. The middle-aged and young people in China today grew up after the founding of New China, they are nevertheless, still influenced at times by the old view of men as superior to women.

At work, among men and women of equal ability, men tend to be given positions with more responsibility and they enjoy better opportunities to develop their talents. In many homes most of the household chores are usually done by women. There are still people who advocate such old thinking as "A woman's duty is to be a good wife and kind mother" or "Women belong in the kitchen."

There are women who are victims of this conventional thinking, accepting the old view of male superiority. They are not aware of their own strength and have no confidence in themselves. Sometimes after getting married young women become so involved with household chores and child care that

they lose their ambitions. But the majority of women refuse any idea of remaining in or going back to the kitchen.

Because of the holdovers from traditional society, women often face more obstructions and difficulties than men do in their pursuit of a career or study, and greater courage, perseverance and redouble efforts are needed to achieve their goal.

With the development of material production and socialist culture, household chores will no longer prevent women working outside their homes. The feudal ideology will finally be eliminated when the people's cultural standard and political consciousness have been improved. We are fully confident that in building China women will not only constitute half of the labor force in quantity but in quality as well.

The Stream of Life Flows On
— The Story of Bingxin

by

YAN CHUNDE



Xie Bingxin today.

I

SHE was 83 on October 5 last year. Her life and her work have advanced with the century and with China and the changes here. A pioneer of the Chinese new literature in the 1920s, her name has shone in the Chinese literary world and in the hearts of Chinese readers for over 60 years.

II

She was born in Fujian Province at a time of deep national sorrow. It was the year 1900, when the armies of the Eight Allied Powers were converging on Beijing.

Her great grandfather had been an illiterate tailor, whose life was one of suffering and humiliation. Her grandfather by dint of hard study rose from an ordinary teacher to a man of learning. Her father gave up his studies at 17 to join the armed forces, and served successively as an officer aboard a cruiser of the Qing imperial navy, as president of the Qing naval academy, and as a department chief in the Navy Ministry of the Republic. He spent the greater part of his life fighting against foreign aggression and it was amid such flames of patriotism that Bingxin passed her childhood.

When she was only three, her family moved to Yantai, Shandong Province, to a house by the sea. Of those childhood years, Bingxin wrote: "All I saw the year round were green hills, boundless water, blue-clad sailors and gray ships of war. I heard only the wind in the hills, the sound of the billows, brisk commands and passwords, and the morning and evening bugle

calls. The monotony of life affected my mental development, which did not follow the course of normal little girls. All day long I played beside the sea or at the foot of the hills. My only friends were seafaring men." The sea, however, kindled her wonderful imagination and filled her with visions of poetry and painting that she would carry with her long after she had left the seashore.

A writer is a child of the times. Bingxin was one of the new generation of writers that emerged during the May 4th Movement along with the birth of a new epoch. Because of her literary accomplishments and their influence, at this time and later, she has been rated as the first woman writer in the history of new Chinese literature.

As a child Bingxin had wanted to be a doctor so that someday she herself might cure her mother's chronic illness. She was also encouraged by the exhortations of her father: "China, the sick man of East Asia, needs good doctors, so why not become a doctor?" In 1918 she successfully passed the entrance examinations to the science preparatory course of the Peking Union Women's College. The day after the outbreak of the May 4th Movement in the following year, she became the secretary of the student body in her school and a member of the propaganda section of the Beijing Federation of Women Students. She began to write and publish propaganda articles. Reminiscing on this patriotic movement led by the Chinese youth, she wrote: "The powerful ideological trend of the times forced me out of the narrow gates of my home and the missionary school I was attending; it cleared my vision and enabled me to see the many

problems in the semi-feudal, semi-colonial society around me.” Young Bingxin, not yet twenty, embodied her observations of life and society in a story called *Liangge Jiating* (The Two Families), which first appeared in the *Beijing Morning Post*. It was one of the earliest of the so-called “problem stories”* in new Chinese literature and was followed, in quick succession, by *Siren Du Qiaocui* (The Lone Haggard), *Qu Guo* (Leaving the Country), *Guo Qi* (The National Flag) and *Yu'er* (Fishes), all “problem stories” of blood and tears, of humiliation, suffering, oppression and of outcries. In those hectic days, as soon as school was over, she would throw aside her textbooks and take up the author’s pen; she would write about the current events first and when that was done turn to her personal reminiscences. In 1921 she joined the Literature Research Society, then the most influential literary body in China. At this time she made the major decision to give up her medical studies and study literature instead. By 1923 she was already a writer of some renown in literary circles. That year she graduated with honors ahead of schedule from Yanjing University and went to the United States to continue her studies. She entered Wellesley College in Boston and while there began writing essays. Three years later she returned to China, married the noted sociologist Wu Wenzao and taught at Yanjing University, the Beijing Institute of the Liberal Arts and then at the Natural Science for Women and Qinghua University. Occasionally, she would publish an article.

* Stories focusing on specific problems and injustices in the society.

The 1930s were a critical decade for the Chinese nation. Bingxin and her husband, who had been touring Europe and America, returned to find that the War of Resistance had broken out. During the next few years, the couple led a roving, unsettled life. They lived for a time in faraway Yunnan Province. Though in very poor health, Bingxin had to write to earn a meager livelihood. In 1940 they moved to Chongqing. There she took part in cultural and relief work and edited the magazine *Women's Culture*. Later, she became a member of the National Political Consultative Conference of the Kuomintang Government. She was also a member of the All-China Association of Art and Literary Circles for Resistance to the Enemy, through which she came into contact with such noted writers and poets as Guo Moruo, Lao She and Feng Naichao. This was a difficult but unforgettable time in her life, a period of trials and one of enlightenment. Now she understood that China's hope and future lay with the Chinese Communist Party and the broad masses of workers and peasants under its leadership.

In 1946 Bingxin and her family went to Japan. Wu Wenzao, her husband, was the chief of the political section of the "Chinese Mission to Japan." In 1949 Bingxin joined the faculty of the Journalist Department of Tokyo University, being the first woman to hold a professorship there. While abroad, the sufferings in her motherland distressed her greatly. The flames of hope and faith kindled during the War of Resistance still burnt fiercely within her — she read revolutionary literature, secretly listened to broadcasts from the liberated areas . . . and searched for some understanding of "truth" and what path she should follow. When

finally the darkness scattered and her motherland was reborn, she felt an inward joy she had never experienced before in her life. She now knew where her future lay.

In 1951 Bingxin made another major decision that changed the course of her life. Risking her life, she embarked on the dangerous journey back to the motherland, having decided to devote herself to the rebuilding of New China. In the years that followed, with the solicitude of the late Premier Zhou Enlai, she plunged into various kinds of social work while actively continuing her creative writing. She was elected a delegate to the successive sessions of the National People's Congress, and was made a council member and later secretary of the Chinese Writers Association. She has been abroad many times, visiting India, Japan, the Soviet Union, England, Italy and Switzerland, and has attended, as China's representative, the World Mothers Congress and the Asian-African Writers Congress, making notable contributions to the promotion of friendship among the peoples of the world, to the strengthening of world peace and to the advancement of international cultural exchanges.

III

As a writer, Bingxin's talent first revealed itself in the short story form. Her numerous short stories have been published in several collections titled *Chaoren* (Supermen), *Wangshi* (Things of the Past), *Guniang* (Maiden), *Quguo* (Leaving the Country) and *Dong'er Guniang* (The Winter Girl) and in many

volumes of selected works. A complete collection of her short stories appears in the first volume of a five-volume *Collected Works of Bingxin* compiled by the Shanghai Literature and Art Press, publication of which began in 1983.

Chaoren, first published in 1921, drew instant widespread attention. The enthusiastic response showed that her work had touched upon social problems people were universally concerned about. At this time young people, in general, were restless, looking for an answer to or a framework in which to understand "what is life?" Bingxin's stories appealed to this group, they gave the young people, if not answers, then a better understanding of the problems they faced and the questions they were asking. Many other writers tried to emulate her style. The philosophy of "love" permeated her earlier writings. She felt that the barriers and crimes in the world were all due to the absence of love, and so she began to seek the supernatural and surrealistic, believing that "love," like springtime, would bring warmth to mankind. Of course, it was also this banner of love that kept her, in difficult times, away from the abyss of despair and made her writings such a pleasure and comfort to read. Whatever their motives, her "problem stories" mirrored the realities of China; they exposed social contradictions, gave vent to her dissatisfaction with and opposition to the feudal society, and described the despondency of intellectuals in their quest for truth.

In the year 1931, Bingxin heard the roar of cannons and the cries of the poor, and saw the suffering of millions struggling on the brink of death. She wrote *Fen* (Parting of the Ways), a story that