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Double Task

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## Double Task

### Sit Tsui

Could you please elaborate on *peace*?  
 To eliminate capitalism, the wars are all caused by capitalism.  
 —Joan Hinton<sup>1</sup>

Our double task is to resist "development" actively and to learn to love.  
 —Mahasweta Devi (1995, xxii)

**I**f, as Joan Hinton and Mahasweta Devi suggest, capitalist development poses the central threat to human security, then peacemaking requires innovative tactics in this era of capitalist globalization, which infiltrates even the remote and mountainous regions of China. This article explores how rural Chinese women have become agents of social and cultural transformation, breaking away from the coerced collectivism of the Maoist period while also resisting the coerced individualism and competition of China's marketizing economy. Rural women's collectives are engaged in a process of social redistribution, growing out of a communal recognition that one lives and shares with others with whom one's life is caught up. Their peacemaking is embedded in creating rituals of mutuality that stand against the overwhelming ideologies of urbanity, patriarchy, and individualism.

Rural women's collectives are not the same as the People's Commune,

<sup>1</sup> From an interview I conducted with Joan Hinton in Beijing on July 22, 2005, in which I raised this question and she responded. For more, see Sit (2007).

which served as the highest administrative unit in rural areas from 1958 to 1985.<sup>2</sup> Yet the collectives promote cooperative culture to work against the logic of commodity economy and the dominant mentality of individualism. Although common property, public control, and social activity play an important role in their community building, the rural women's collectivity is at heart an ethical project that cultivates a different kind of self-other relation. It is a means of negotiating differences while acknowledging the need to work and live together in ways that are mutually beneficial. This presupposes that to think of the other, as Jacques Derrida remarks, is "to receive, welcome, accept, and admit something other than oneself, the other than oneself" (Derrida 1993, 10).

This ethical project draws heavily from the conception of communal society envisioned by Karl Marx. *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels [1848] 1998) depicts the specter of communism as a means to differentiate ourselves from the logic of capitalism and to imagine the possibility of creating a communal world of sharing with others. The power of this specter lies in its ability to break the hold of bourgeois mentality's naked self-interestedness and "the icy water of egotistical calculation" (44). As Marx points out, "capital is a collective product . . . capital is, therefore, not a personal, but a social power" (Marx and Engels [1848] 1998, 19). In other words, the power of capital can be turned around for collective and socialist use. In his unfinished third volume of *Capital* ([1894] 1991), Marx imagines a community that can socialize or collectivize capital, reorganizing necessary labor and surplus labor to benefit all, including the disadvantaged members of society: "If finally, both (1) necessary labor and (2) the surplus labor are taken to include the amount of labor that those capable of work must always perform for those members of society not yet capable, or no longer capable of working—i.e., if both wages and surplus-value are stripped of their specifically capitalist character—then nothing of these forms remains, but simply those foundations of the forms that are common to all social modes of production" (Marx [1894] 1991, 1015–16).

Rural women's collectives in China are creating socialist modes of production that take seriously the maxim that "those capable of work must always perform for those members of society not yet capable, or no longer capable of working." They are enacting a socialist society that involves an

<sup>2</sup> The People's Commune was the largest collective unit in the rural areas during Mao Zedong's period. It was divided into production brigades and production teams. The commune had governmental, political, and economic functions. Later, the commune was replaced by the official mode of organization, the township.

ongoing redistribution of common resources, including labor power, among group members. To demonstrate innovative approaches to peacemaking grounded in the ethical practice of taking care of others, I will briefly sketch the activities of two women's collectives in rural China: the Luxia-Wanli Mutual Aid Women's Credit Union (LWCU) in Jiangxi Province and the Peasants' Association of Yongji City in Shanxi Province.

Rural communities in China are very heterogeneous, but the economic restructuring and the introduction of market mechanisms since the late 1970s have hit them hard. The LWCU was set up in 1994, amid the economic dislocations created by the wave of speedy commercial modernization stimulated by Deng Xiaoping's visit to south China in 1992. The Peasants' Association of Yongji City began to develop in the context of the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Both collectives seek to cultivate sustainable socialist livelihoods in keeping with the Chinese government's call for the construction of a new socialist countryside, even as they negotiate growing pressure to achieve enhanced productivity, higher living standards, healthy rural culture, neat and clean villages, and democratic administration.

The rural women's collectives have undoubtedly contributed to the construction of a new socialist countryside, facilitating its cultural transformation in particular. They negotiate various forms of violence embedded in the dominant ideology of modernization as well as in patriarchal conventions. The women's innovative strategies include socialization of labor power, maintenance of common property, reinforcement of arts and cultural performance, and attunement to the singular needs of particular populations, especially those disadvantaged members of society who are not capable or no longer capable of working. The women's down-to-earth practices have brought cultural change in daily life while promoting community building as a mode of peacemaking. Tying peace work to an ethical imperative to think of the other and to work for the other, these rural women's collectives take up the double task of resisting capitalist development and recognizing grassroots women's resistances.

### **Luxia-Wanli Mutual Aid Women's Credit Union**

In May 1994, China Social Services and Development Research Center (CSD) and Jiangxi Provincial Women's Federation (JWF) cooperated in creating the first all-women's credit union in China: LWCU. Although all women aged 16 and older are eligible to be members of the credit union, the current membership includes approximately one hundred women from the two village groups. A five-member managing committee is elected by secret ballot. LWCU runs its own projects, since JWF and

CSD endeavor to withhold their assertion of political or monetary influence.

Confronting the combined forces of capitalist globalization and patriarchal tradition, LWCU tries to organize projects that promote women's solidarity and collective development. Over the past seventeen years, LWCU has initiated projects in the areas of education, health care, community building, culture, and economic development. It has created a library. It runs a kindergarten. It conducts evening literacy and agricultural skills classes. It assists local health units in organizing seminars on women's health education and arranging gynecological checkups and treatment.<sup>3</sup> It also provides buns and eggs for breakfast for children. Although all these programs are noteworthy, I will concentrate on three projects that demonstrate LWCU's efforts to socialize labor power for the benefit of all: their alternative organic lily bulb trade, their provision of an electric grinder and thresher for the village, and their construction of a community activity center.

### ***Collective lily bulb production***

Lily bulbs have been grown in Jiangxi province for over five centuries. Peasants usually sell their products to the township processing factory, which is controlled by the party-cum-government elite. Inspired by the people-to-people banana trade between Japanese consumer networks and Filipino farmers, LWCU—in partnership with CSD—began developing an alternative organic lily bulb trade relationship in 1994 (see Sit 2001; Lau 2002).<sup>4</sup> Their goal was to create a sustainable economic cooperative

<sup>3</sup> From November 2000 to August 2001, CSD ran a gynecological checkup program with LWCU and the Women and Children's Health Unit of Wanzai County. The target population of women covered the whole Baishui Township, a total of twelve villages. According to the Women and Children's Health Unit, most of the women suffered from cervical erosion and vaginal infection. In order to ensure complete recovery, the doctors advised the rural women to avoid carrying heavy loads or having sex over the next two weeks. This generated a good discussion among the rural women on how to protect their bodies and health through different methods such as refusing husbands' importunate sexual demands, reallocation of household labor, and making use of local herbs to get the same treatment while saving money. For details, see Lau (2004).

<sup>4</sup> In 1986, the drop in international sugar prices led to acute starvation on the island of Negros in the southern Philippines. This led to the establishment of the Japan Committee for Negros Campaign, which later found that forms of aid such as sending money, food, and medicine would not eradicate the root cause of poverty. After in-depth discussions on the issues of aid and landlessness with the people of Negros, Alter Trade Japan, composed of four major consumers' cooperatives, was formed in 1989 to explore an alternative trade. They chose

project that would involve all LWCU members while generating additional income from agricultural activities. LWCU produces and packages lily bulbs and sells them directly to consumers in Hong Kong and Taiwan through an alternative trade network facilitated by CSD. All net profits from the trade go back to LWCU, apportioned equally as dividends for members, the collective fund, and the education fund.

In 1997, as Hong Kong suffered from the Asian financial crisis, lily bulb sales declined drastically, which generated a significant change in the mode of lily bulb production. In the early years, LWCU had collected lily bulbs from members who grew them on their land. To cope with the financial burden created by falling sales, CSD proposed a shift to collective farming. By covering all the production costs for seeds, rent, and labor, CSD assumed the majority of market risk.

However, although the shift to collective farming of lily bulbs redistributed risk, the rural women still confronted issues pertaining to the dominant logic of calculating labor power in a commodity economy. There were grievances about favoritism among credit union members. To deal with the suspicion of unfair distribution and an insistence on individual benefits, LWCU devised rules for fair practices, which involved a meticulous calculation of the amount of voluntary labor contributed by each member as well as a fair distribution of paid tasks. Adopting a different way of remunerating labor, the managing committee divided labor-force members into five teams, striving for a balance of competence, age, and friendliness on each team. Under the guidance of an elected leader, each team was expected to yield a set target of bulbs and was paid 450 yuan for ninety days labor (Lau 2002).

The more able rural women reserved some of their labor power for other members. They were willing to “perform for those members of society not yet capable or no longer capable of working”: the mothers having babies and the elderly members. These two groups were exempted from heavy work such as digging out lily bulbs from the soil under the burning sun, pulling up weeds, and carrying farmyard manure or water. “Some members have the newly born babies or little children, and some

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Balangan, a green banana, as the commodity. It is not consumed by the local people as it is sour, but the Japanese find that it is tastier than the chemically treated bananas sold by multinational corporations. Later, more banana farmers came together and founded the Balangan Growers' Association. As Seiko Ohashi, one of the major coordinators, remarks, there is something more important than trading: “we have to see how we can utilize these commodities to create different levels of solidarity.” The alternative trade is used “as a means to benefit the community and for building up the community spirit” (Ohashi 1994–95).

are too old and weak to take up heavy work,” explained Hualian, a managing committee member and one of the women selected for the PeaceWomen Project.<sup>5</sup> “In that case,” she continued, “other members take up more work. We can understand. No one complains about that.”<sup>6</sup> The capable rural women work for others, providing “free” labor and devoting their labor power to community building in the name of motherhood, sisterhood, and care of the elderly rather than to capitalist accumulation. These ethical commitments also shape how LWCU redistributes common resources. As Hualian noted, “In order to encourage members to do heavy work, we agreed that 60 percent of the proceeds went to members who pulled up the weeds in the farm and dug out lily bulbs, and 40 percent were dividends for all members, including the elderly and the absentees, i.e., those going out to the cities to work.” By devising this distributive mechanism, the rural women used the common resources cultivated through collective farming to foster a feeling of community, a feeling of being a part of the whole, while working together and working for others in everyday life.

***Managing collective resources: The grinder and thresher***

Wendy Harcourt (1994, 4) has suggested that feminist sustainable development requires a “shift from an understanding of development as an efficient way to convert natural and human resources into material wealth to a perspective which de-emphasizes efficiency and growth and respects the interrelationship between people, their communities and their life-support systems.” LWCU’s purchase and management of a grinder and thresher demonstrates how rural women have sought to shift from an exclusive focus on efficiency to larger issues of human need and community relationships.

LWCU purchased a grinder and thresher that has served the village for more than ten years. As increasing numbers of villagers have migrated to cities for work, LWCU decided to subcontract management of the machine to its members. The group stipulated that a manager should have a good reputation in the village, good management ability, and be relatively poor—criteria that many members fit. In considering candidates for the management position, LWCU decided to give priority to a forty-year-

<sup>5</sup> The PeaceWomen Project is an international women’s project making women’s peace work more visible. It began as an effort to nominate one thousand women, collectively, for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

<sup>6</sup> In this article, I draw on interviews conducted with LWCU members in Jiangxi Province in July 2005. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own. Interview transcripts are on file with the author.

old, single man whose fingers had been severed by machines while working in the local plastics factory. Because he was unable to do heavy farm work or find another factory job, LWCU decided he was the best candidate to manage the grinder and thresher as a way to earn a living. Through his appointment as manager, the rural women not only kept common property under collective control but also used the machinery to benefit the disadvantaged.

In organizing its collective projects, LWCU has also devised a means to use labor power as community currency. Under the market economy, many peasants do not have enough cash to cover daily expenses. To tackle this pervasive problem, LWCU has enabled members to make up for their lack of money by exchanging their labor power. By donating extra labor to transplanting rice seedlings, harvesting, and building houses, villagers can accrue credit that can be used to purchase daily necessities. How does LWCU calculate labor power as community currency? What is the exchange rate? Is it computed in terms of hours or days? Are labor credits recorded in black and white? Hualian gave me an interesting answer to these questions: “we calculate and remember by heart.” According to this calculation, labor power is abstracted and calculated as a commodity, but it is used not to accumulate profit but rather as a means of exchange and subsistence. Operating as a commodity and as a medium of exchange, labor power does not beget money but functions as a barter system activated to maintain long-term mutual relations.

In devising this alternative economy, LWCU echoes the view of some ecofeminists who think it necessary to recognize the hidden work of housewives, subsistence peasants, and small producers in the informal sector, particularly in the global South. This subsistence formation is not only “a kind of hidden underground of the capitalist market economy, it can also show the way out of the many impasses of this destructive system called industrial society, market economy or capitalist patriarchy” (Mies and Shiva 1993, 298).

### ***The red brick house***

From the moment LWCU was formed, a number of male villagers were suspicious of women’s organizing ability and were hostile to the organization. Within this patriarchal culture, LWCU members encountered multiple obstacles as they worked together to create a women’s space. In the early years, LWCU organized activities such as its general assembly, the kindergarten class, and the women’s literacy classes in the ancestral hall, which is the public property of the village committee. Although the hall belonged to all villagers, including the rural women, LWCU was

required to pay rent for every activity. This derelict ancestral hall had not been repaired for years. LWCU members used a piece of cloth and some old tables and chairs to set up a classroom there for the children. While conducting their general assembly, they would be interrupted by men. These disruptions motivated the women to create their own place.

Using the entire collective fund gained from the alternative organic lily bulb trade over a five-year period—a sum of 60,000 yuan (approximately US\$7,790)—the women built their own four-hundred-square-meter red brick house in 1999. Many members were involved in achieving this common goal, participating in budget discussions, mapping land resources, dealing with conflicting opinions among the members, negotiating with the township government and the village committee, searching for construction workers, designing the building, purchasing and transporting building materials, coordinating the volunteer labor shifts, and settling conflicts outside and inside LWCU.

The red brick house provides space for multiple activities and includes an office, a library, a conference room, a children's playground, a space for drying lily bulbs and lily powder, the grinder and thresher, a doctor's office, a kindergarten, a kitchen, a classroom for women's cultural education, and a space reserved for the family planning unit. The red brick house is not only the rural women's collective property but also visible proof of their ability to confront the adversities of life together. It is palpable evidence that rural women can generate a culture of sustainability, tolerance, giving, and reciprocity. The three-story red brick house stands on a country crossroads, which symbolizes LWCU's status in the village. As a distinctive women's space, the red brick house represents women's organized break from both the patriarchal ancestral hall and the increasingly mainstream ideology of self-centered individualism in the market economy.

### **Peasants' Association of Yongji City**

Initiated in 2003 by Zheng Bing, a rural PeaceWoman, the Peasants' Association of Yongji City is the first peasants' association in China officially registered under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. A primary school teacher for over ten years in Zaizi Village of Shanxi province in north China, Zheng organized science and technology training courses for local peasants. Recognizing that if peasants did not have common interests, it would be very easy for them to be disbanded, she decided to organize them (Zhao and Yang 2007).

As the Asian financial crisis revealed the fragility of the bubble economy, Zheng quit her teaching job and in 1998 began to devote herself to

organizing cultural and economic activities based on grassroots women's collectives. With support of the Women's Federation of Yongji City, she launched a women's club, which was named the Center for Women's Cultural Activities and Women's Association. When male peasants showed interest in the association, they were also accepted as members, and the scale of the association became larger and larger. Formally established in 2003, the Peasants' Association of Yongji City now has 3,865 members from thirty-five villages in two counties. It organizes six technological services centers, a handcrafts cooperative, steamed buns workshops, a paint and coatings factory, and an ecological agriculture zone (Zhao 2006). Socialized labor, redistribution of resources, and concern for those unable to labor are central to these initiatives.

***"What we want is that all of us should be bosses"***

In 2004, emphasizing the importance of cooperation, Zheng organized eighty-two families as a shareholding company to work together in a paint and coatings factory whose first task was to promote environmental protection. From the outset, the shareholding model was unique in that it allowed two quite different forms of shareholding. One kind of share could be purchased for 300 yuan with a limit of ten shares per person; the other type of share was free for anyone who had lost his or her labor power. The factory employed twenty-nine workers who were also shareholders. They elected the factory head and the board of directors. Directors of the association could earn a share or half-share, depending on their voluntary working hours. As the venture was launched, there were arguments about shareholdings. A male member wished to own a bigger share, equal to 46,000 yuan. Zheng strongly opposed this, noting that "if he becomes the biggest shareholder, then we all become his employees. What we want is that all of us should be bosses" (Kou 2007, 147). Thus Zheng promoted collective ownership and social control of common property as a useful tool for deterring capitalist accumulation, competition, and monopoly.

Zheng also pressed the Peasants' Association to meet the needs of those ill served by capitalist development, those who did not have sufficient funds to buy shares, and those whose labor power was impaired. She suggested that the association give free shares to the twelve poorest households, which included developmentally and physically disabled family members. Many shareholders initially disagreed with Zheng. They had a heated debate over core values of capitalism such as selfishness and individualism. At last, they agreed to accept disabled persons as members, acknowledging the value of mutuality over efficiency.

***Reconceptualizing voluntary labor***

During the People's Commune period, Mao Zedong promoted a mode of socialist modernization that exploited rural workers for the purpose of national accumulation. Under the labor credit system, every villager was obliged to provide "free" labor for national industrialization. The donation of free labor was made compulsory through strict administrative enforcement. For the past twenty years, economic reform policy has abandoned this compulsory labor system and advocated privatization and a shift to a commodity economy.

The Peasants' Association has countered this seemingly irresistible trend by adopting a new mode of voluntary labor that encourages villagers to provide local public services such as road construction and drainage system maintenance. For example, Zaizi Village was once nicknamed "Dirty Pig Lane" because of poor sanitary conditions. In early 2004, the female core members mobilized the villagers to do voluntary work, clearing the garbage and cleaning up the village. They visited each family and publicized the importance of public health. Three days later, 198 out of 213 households got involved in the cleaning campaign. In addition, some villagers took initiatives to repair not only their own part of the drainage system but others' parts as well. Some villagers were impressed by the collective effort and abandoned their initial indifference as they realized that this voluntary labor arrangement was also an exchange of labor power among the villagers for the purpose of community building. The association invited some elderly members to set up a voluntary team of hygiene supervisors in charge of cleaning up the country roads. Seventy-three-year-old Liu Fengxiang and two other elderly women volunteered as hygiene supervisors, using their spades to put poultry waste into the dustpans. They proudly talked about their work, "every week we do investigation and evaluation. People pay respects to us" (Wang and Wu 2005; Ma 2006).

A significant reduction in the cost of public construction projects is an additional benefit of the volunteer labor system. In Zaizi Village, for example, rubbish collection, sewage system repair, road construction, and the building of a children's basketball court cost a mere 30,000 yuan as a result of volunteer labor. A nearby village of comparable size paid 140,000 yuan solely for road construction.

Voluntary labor supports not only vital public services but also social activities and cultural performances that contribute to community building. In January 2003, for example, the association organized more than one thousand rural women to perform the "Rice Sprout Song," a traditional lion drum dance. Performed in both the countryside and the city, these free activities for local people attracted large numbers of participants as they

encouraged peasants to embrace a lifestyle at some distance from “the icy water of egotistical calculation” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1998, 44).

The feeling of solidarity that arises from participation in collective activities rooted within daily practices can be life-transforming, embodying Marx’s conception of revolutionary practice as a conjuncture of social- and self-change. By devoting labor to social redistribution rather than to capitalist accumulation, peasants in the association take pleasure in helping others as they gain others’ respect for their contributions. Working for others through socialized labor may mistakenly be regarded as a residual practice in a rural society, but it is also a radical practice when considered in the face of the forces of globalization and the hegemonic mentality of individualism and entrepreneurship. As enacted by the PeaceWomen of Luxia-Wanli Mutual Aid Women’s Credit Union and the Peasants’ Association of Yongji City, building a culture of collectivity through daily practices of voluntary labor and redistribution of profits is also a profound mode of peacemaking that counteracts the violence of capitalist economic endeavors.

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## The Big Words and Our Work: Peace, Women, and the Everyday

Tani Barlow

**O**ne of the questions before us is how to knit the big words—like peace, human security, gender, and justice—into the routines of everyday life. How is it possible to put these words around a quotidian experience so indented to violence, war, and predatory capitalism and to the brutal commodity life and the normalization of human suffering that accompany them? The deceptively simple question of gender and everyday life and the project of examining how gender can be used as a category of analysis in peace work poses, for me at least, the general problem of how these words,

I am grateful to Professor Lau Kin Chi for introducing me to the PeaceWomen Project and for supporting my ongoing involvement in it.

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