

Document 10.9: Excerpts from a memoir by Li Xiuwen (1890–1992), describing growing up female

Born in a Guangxi Province village to a poor peasant family, Li Xiuwen's life spanned a tumultuous century in China's history. She was the wife of one of China's most famous twentieth century generals, Li Zongren. Li Zongren was also elected vice president of China in 1947 and became the country's acting president from 1948–1949. After the Communists took power, Li Xiuwen lived in Hong Kong, then Cuba and the United States. In 1973, she returned to Guilin in China. She dictated her memoirs to the wife of her nephew, and they were serialized in Chinese newspapers. Her son translated the text into English.

Girlhood

In the old days, giving birth to a boy meant the bringing of new wealth to the family. Having a girl was to lose money. So my birth did not bring any happiness to my parents. On the contrary, I gave them additional burden.

When I was younger, my mother secretly told me that I almost did not have the luck to live in this world. I was bewildered by this, and I found out later that during her pregnancy, a farmer's wife would have been very worried that the baby would be a girl. According to custom, to bear a girl in the first pregnancy was considered all right. It meant first having a flower, then bearing fruit. If the wife had another girl, the in-laws would be very unhappy. Her husband would lose his love for his wife. If she bore three girls in succession, the wife would be considered very unlucky, and she would suffer a lot in her life. Because it was so important for a woman to bear a boy, many newborn girls were suffocated by the mother when she found out she had not given birth to a boy. Even though the husband and the in-laws knew the truth, they did not feel sorry about the tragedy because they did not really want the additional burden in the family. To the outside world, they explained the little girl had been stillborn.

When I was born, my mother did not have the heart to do this terrible inhuman act. She was willing to go through all the suffering to bring me into the world. I, like my older brother and sisters, grew up on the land. As a little girl, I started to work in the house, then outside of it. At my birth, my brother was thirteen years old. He already knew how to cultivate the field. My oldest sister at the age of eight labored at home and in the field. My second sister, seven years old, went out every day to gather wild greens and vegetables to feed the pigs. The third sister at the age of five looked after me at home. When I was five I carried firewood and grass to the stove and watched the fire. I was very diligent and intelligent, so I was the favorite daughter of my parents....

Wedding Traditions

[In] 1911, our two families were busy preparing for our wedding. My family spent more money on my wedding than those of my three older sisters' because 1) there were fewer members in the family; 2) the harvest of the past few years had been very good and my family had more money; 3) I was my parents' favorite. Therefore I had a larger dowry. My dowry included my clothes for all seasons, twenty bundles of hand-woven cloth, suitcases and, of course, everything to furnish the bedroom, and many other things.

To show off my skill in needlework, I made ladies' embroidered shoes for my mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, and men's shoes for my father-in-law and brothers-in-law as gifts from the bride. Of course, needlework and many other skills were acquired by young girls long before their marriage.

In those days, there were many interesting old formalities and customs in the farming community when a young girl was getting married. The most impressive custom in my memory was the songs-blessing-the new-bride party. This party given by the bride's female relatives was held the night before the bride left her home. At the party, the ladies took the opportunity to show off their talents and skill making up songs on the spur of the moment. They also took the occasion to amuse and enjoy themselves.

The purpose of the party was a gathering where the female relatives gave praise, congratulations, advice, and good wishes to the bride in songs made up by the participants. First, they brought the bride—a good and obedient girl—to her parents, then to her brothers and sisters. Then they congratulated her for having found a good husband, and they advised her to be an obedient wife and a good daughter-in-law. Finally the songs expressed wishes that she would bear many sons and that she would have a happy and prosperous family.

After the lady relatives finished singing, the bride would sing the songs expressing her sorrow at leaving home and her worries about going to the new family. She hoped her husband would love her and her in-laws would like her. The words of a brides' song are as follows:

At the age of one, I sat on my mother's knee.
At the age of two, I crawled around her feet.
At three, I learned to walk and run.
At four, I made the fire to boil water for tea.
At five, I picked buckets full of greens to feed the pigs.
At six, I washed vegetables in the stream.
At seven, I held a bag full of cotton thread for my mother.
At eight, I learned the weaving machine.
At nine, I learned to weave.
At ten, I wove with ramie and silk.
At eleven, I wove expertly.
At twelve, I was praised for my weaving skill.
At thirteen, I knew how to make shoes.
At fourteen, I embroidered well.
At fifteen, my hair was combed in the young maiden's style.
At sixteen, the matchmaker came to our house.
At seventeen, my father prepared for my dowry.
At eighteen, my mother bought the bridal bed.
At nineteen, my parents completed buying my dowry.

At twenty, a young lady left home to get married....

Seeing that everything was complete, the bride was sent off amid the noise of music, drum, and firecrackers. The night that the bride left her home, her women relatives got together for the songs-blessing-the-bride's party. In good weather, the party was held in the courtyard of the bride's home. In bad weather, it was held in the bedroom of the bride's mother. There were a few big bowls of fried beans, cups, and pots of tea on the table.

The leading lady was famous in her singing and in composing her songs. The songs were simple in melody and in words, but beautiful to listen to. When one lady finished singing, another lady started. The songs were mainly songs of thanks to the bride's parents for bringing the bride into the world and raising her with care, and praise for the good relationship established among the bride's brothers and sisters. Some mentioned good times and bad times, life together and life apart. They also touched upon happiness, sadness, and despair in a woman's life. They told of the warm relationships in the bride's family and need for the bride to avoid making any mistakes in the husband's home. It was so hard and difficult to be a woman.

As the singing progressed, it touched all phases of life. The songs also touched the hearts and minds of all who listened. The women's songs seemed to tell their own stories—some joyful and happy, some sad and angry. Some of the ladies became so emotional that tears rolled down from their eyes. They ate fried beans, drank tea, listened to the songs till late into the night. The bride's mother sat, continually wiping away her tears.

The next day, before the bride entered the bridal sedan chair, usually there was a singing farewell party in the bedroom of the bride's mother or sister-in-law. This time, every woman relative gathered around the bride and listened to her singing the farewell songs. The bride sang and cried at the same time. She told of her reluctance and unwillingness to leave home. She expressed her regret that she could not yet pay back the love of her

parents and the help and consideration of her brothers and sisters. Finally, she thanked her relatives for their good relationships and good wishes and advice.

If the bride had any complaints against her family members, she would take this opportunity to tell them off or scold them. That was the reason sometimes the step-mother and sisters-in-law were absent from the party. However, it was the custom that the matchmaker was the one who received all the complaints and scolding in the farewell song party, even if the matchmakers did nothing wrong. If the bride did not lodge complaints against the matchmaker, she would be laughed at or berated by the people who thought she was happy to leave her family.

The singing farewell party, held a few hours before her departure, was the last chance for the bride to sing what was on her mind—words that she had not dared to say. She sang till her heart's content. However, the beginning of the bride's songs contained no bad words against people, for she was afraid that she might feel embarrassed meeting the same people in the future. Therefore, in the beginning, the bride mostly praised people in her song. As her singing progressed, she got quite emotional. She freed herself and started to spell out all her complaints. Her songs brought out the feelings of joy, happiness, sadness, and despair from her listeners. They showed her their sympathies, for they might also have similar lives..

Nevertheless, marriage was a happy event in a person's life. Everyone was supposedly joyful. I remembered in the singing farewell party, I sat on my mother's bed singing. During those moments, so many thoughts came into my mind. I was worried that I was marrying a no-good husband as my sisters had. They had terribly hard lives. While I was singing, a female relative combed my hair for me. My mother was busy coming and going in and out of the room. I looked at her. She was getting quite old. Her back was starting to bend. She hated to see me leaving her. My mother secretly looked at me from time to time.

I thought of her having such a hard life. She labored hard to bring up six children. As her daughter, I had not yet served her or cared for her. I soon would leave home and go to my husband's family. In my family, my sister-in-law was not so kind. I had a weak older brother and my younger brother was not yet grown up. I began to feel very sad and broke down crying. I cried and sang at the same time.

I sang what was on my mind. My sister-in-law did not come to the party. She knew that I might scold her. However, in my song I didn't complain against my matchmaker because I had no complaint to lodge against her. I was the one who decided my own marriage. I told my mother that I wanted to marry my young man. Much later, my life was lucky and fortunate. My matchmaker came to the city to see me. She said she had the fortune and honor to be my matchmaker. The fortune teller did not come. He might have gone away.

After I finished singing, I was led by two ladies into the bridal sedan chair. But I heard the music and drums and firecrackers along the way going to my husband's house. The wedding ceremony was very simple. One thing that stayed in my mind was the demeanor of the husband on the wedding night.

After the wedding ceremony, the bride went into the bridal room. Her mind was stirred by all different thoughts. She worried about her husband's looks, his character¹. Was he going to be good to her? How were her mother-in-law, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law going to treat her?

My mind was full of different thoughts. As time passed and the red candlestick had burned to half its length, I heard the groom's step coming into the room. My two lady companions hurried to fill up two wine cups. He brought the two cups of wine in front of me and said: "Let us both drink to our happiness."

Not only were my two lady companions surprised by the groom's act, I was very surprised also. I quietly looked at my husband, and suddenly I felt my heart very at ease. I

¹ Marriages were arranged, and in most cases the bride and groom had never met before their wedding.

saw my husband was quite handsome, and he had a smiling face. He stood in front of me. So this was my husband, Zongren!....

Li Zongren, or Delin, as he was also known, was in a military academy when he and Xiuwen were married. In the first years of their marriage, she only saw him when he had leave. After he graduated from the academy, he was immediately assigned to a regiment. As tradition dictated, Xiuwen lived in her husband's parents' home.

My father-in-law was a teacher with a gentle manner. The control and management of the household affairs was completely in my mother-in-law's hands. She was not only good in work and management, but also capable in canning. She did all her work expertly. She worked very hard and was very busy but not confused in her work.

My older brother-in-law was a laborer in the rice fields. My mother-in-law mainly went to the marketplace to sell polished rice. Besides going to Liangjiang market, she also went to Sankou market. In three days, she went to two marketplaces. It was very hard work for her to carry two big bushels of rice on a pole on her shoulder. She also brought needlework with her. She either made shoe soles or made thread when she found time in the marketplace. She never stopped working. She never complained. She always chatted and laughed. We saw her labor so hard, and we didn't take things easy.

My mother-in-law never scolded her children. She always gently taught and guided them. At night, my father-in-law gave his children lessons, and sometimes my mother-in-law taught them to be good persons. She encouraged the boys to work, to have willpower, principles, and strength and not to depend on others. Just because one was poor did not mean that he shouldn't have ambitions. If one was rich he must also be kind and sensitive. One should have good manners and a sense of honor. He should preserve his purity and self-respect. One should not be greedy and take things that didn't belong to him. Learn to forgive others' mistakes and know how to correct one's own mistakes or weaknesses to make a fresh start. She taught her children these principles, and she put them into practice herself.

My mother-in-law did not have any formal education; however, she was kind, generous, hard-working, and conciliatory. People praised her virtue and kindness. She had much great influence on us....

When one has an open mind and tolerance, one would not notice other people's shortcomings or faults. That was also my mother-in-law's teaching and influence that made me a better person and helped me improve myself in later years.

My mother-in-law was very capable but very modest. She had the responsibility to work hard to feed the whole family. I never heard her complain. She understood that her husband was a learned person who could not accustom himself to manual work. She knew he was a very important person to the family. Without him, she would not be such a perfect and complete person....

When I had my first boy in the village, my mother-in-law already had a liberal mind. She brought water and soap into my room. People said that she was contaminated with my dirt, and she shouldn't be allowed to burn the incense and candles to pay respect to the ancestors. The first month after the baby was born, the mother was considered to be the dirtiest person in the world. She was not allowed to go to the kitchen or living room. She had her own chopsticks, bowls and things that were not allowed to touch or mix with other people's things. Also she was not allowed to eat certain foods. When she washed her clothes, she would go down river so the water wouldn't touch the clothes of other people.

In our farming community, whenever a woman spoke of bearing children, they were very worried because they had to go through all the suffering and hardship. But no woman dared to say that she didn't want to have babies. If she didn't give birth to children, she would be looked down upon and have no position in the family. When I think of them now, I feel so sorry and pity them. A pregnant woman had to work in the last days [of her

pregnancy]. There were many women who gave birth in the fields while they were at work....

Xiuwen's first son died in infancy.

The Role of a Wife

In 1917, the fighting stopped in Guangdong Province where my husband was. He was stationed in Xinghui County. As soon as he settled down, he sent his aide to Guilin to take me to Xinghui to live and to care for him. When I heard that I would go to live with my husband, I was happy and worried at the same time. I was happy because my husband had been doing well in his military career, and he wanted me to go to live with him. I was worried because a woman from a farm village like me would not know how to behave and act in the big city.

In the meantime, I did not know whether my parents-in-law would want me to leave home. What would I do if they didn't? Of course, as a daughter-in-law, I did not dare to speak first. I waited for my mother-in-law to speak. She said, "Delin has been away for two years. There is no one at his side to care for him. It is all right that we have one less person in the house. You should go out to see the world. Husband and wife should live together. If we do not let you go, we won't know when we can hold our grandson." So she told me to pack and asked our clan's old relative to accompany me in the journey.

My husband's aide advised me not to bring too many clothes with me to the big city, for the ladies in the big city dressed differently. So I packed a few of my best clothes and a few pairs of shoes. I didn't want to leave my silver jewelry, so I put all of them on me. The aide laughed as he stood there looking at me!

I said goodbye to all my in-laws and started walking to Guilin in the company of my clan elder. Very late in the afternoon, we arrived in the city. The next morning, my relative

brought me to the store to buy some necessities, such as washcloth, toothbrush, toothpaste, etc.

When I was walking in the street, I felt I was out of place and my appearance was rustic. The ladies in the city combed their hair differently and they dressed differently from country women. At the time, there were not many ladies walking, and the streets were not very crowded. I had heard that the feet of the city ladies were about three inches long². I had heard that they seemed so weak and unsteady but gentle when they were walking. Now when I saw them, they were weak and unsteady all right, but not as gentle as I had heard. My relative told me, “Those walking by themselves are not from the rich families. The ladies from the rich families always have a servant lady to support them while walking.” I would not want to be like them, going through all the pain to let someone break their arches in order to have three-inch feet. How could the women on the farm with such small feet carry very heavy loads and go into the fields to work?...

The conditions and care for giving birth to a baby was much better in the city than in the village. And Guangdong [Province] was much better than Guangxi. Youlin was born in Guangdong, so his care was much better than my first boy.

When Youlin was born, my husband was a person with more knowledge. He broke with all the old customs. When he heard the newborn baby crying, he ran into the room before the midwife could stop him. After he knew the baby boy was safely delivered to the world, he walked slowly out of the room with a big smile. His associates in the army and county heard that a son was born to him. They came to congratulate him. My husband fully enjoyed this kind of gathering.

When my son was one month old, my husband gave him the name Youlin because my husband's name is Delin. Youlin meant Junior. It was his hope that his son would follow in his footsteps in his career.

² Women in cities were more likely to have bound feet than those living in rural areas, especially in the South.

When Youlin was a month old, a party was given. There were so many people coming to this party to congratulate my husband and me. He was very busy among the guests and fully enjoyed every minute of it. The guests brought so many presents for Youlin—gold Buddhas, gold bracelets, gold coins, gold anklets, jade bracelets and jade jewelry, all very expensive gifts.

I was so surprised and asked my husband, “Do people give such expensive gifts to a newborn baby?” My husband told me, “A baby’s one-month-old party is very important and special. The guests brought their presents with good wishes and blessings. We cannot refuse them.” Later, I found out that if my husband wanted anything, all he had to do was say it. The local merchants would give it to him, but my husband never asked for anything for himself, for he knew he would have to return the favors. Though these presents for Youlin were too expensive at that time, to refuse them would have hurt their feelings.

Not long after Youlin was born, my husband moved to many places with the army. With a baby, it was so difficult and hard to travel. We had to move to Huiyang, Gaozhou, and Zhaoqingdu in Guangdong Province. Some of the local language I couldn’t understand. I was tired of all the parties given by the people. My husband tried to console me whenever I felt moody and unhappy. Every time I saw him playing with my son and laughing, I became happy myself and forgot everything. There was a saying: “A wife should follow and live with her husband. She should take care of her husband well and make him happy”....

With the ongoing fighting, Li Xiuwen eventually returned with her young son to live with her parents-in-law. In 1923, her husband took a second wife.

Guo Dejie: My Husband's Second Wife and I

The destiny of my life changed greatly. Through friends' introduction, my husband married a second wife: Guo Dejie. Now he had a young woman besides me. What was my position? In Shanghai, my in-laws learned about this second marriage and never forgave Delin. They told me about it.

I was in grief and despair. But in the olden days it was ordinary, not strange at all, for rich people and high officials to have three or four wives. My husband needed someone beside him to care and serve him. I was not interested in socializing in high society. Moreover, I had a little boy and couldn't follow my husband to the battlefield. Therefore, I had no complaint that my husband married a second wife.

My in-laws wanted me to join my husband in Guipin because they were pitying me. Moreover, I wanted to see how my husband would treat me. When we arrived in his office building, my husband stood outside waiting for us. He said hello to me. Then he took his son in his arms. He said, "Ah, you're growing tall. You look like your father." At the time, Youlin was five years old and seemed to remember that the person holding him was his father. He opened his eyes wide and looked at him for a while and then called him, "Daddy."...

My husband brought us to the living room. He called out, "Dejie, come out."

I saw a very young lady come out to the living room. She had a slim body and beautiful face. She bowed her head towards me then turned around and filled a cup of tea, which she handed to me. After I took the cup, she turned to her husband and tried to take Youlin from him to hold. Because Youlin didn't know her, he struggled to get out of her arms and came over to me. Guo Dejie then turned around and went into her room.

Finally, my husband spoke. "I married Dejie because I needed someone to care for me and to accompany me to social functions. Now you are here. You and she can be good

companions. Do you think that is all right?" My husband talked with great ease. It seemed he didn't have any intention of being unkind to me. What could I say to him? I had never said anything against his wishes. Then I told him, "It is all right." The meeting ended this way. I observed that his second wife seemed quite polite and knew the right ceremonies. When in our first meeting, I sat down, she remained standing. My husband stopped me and said, "We are one family now. Don't stand on ceremony. Her name is Dejie. She is younger than you. She should respect you. For the past two years, we haven't lived together. Nobody cared for me. After marrying Dejie, my life has been much better. From now on, you don't have to work. She was a student. She should have the knowledge to be a good person. If you have anything you want done, just tell her."

After listening to my husband speak, I hoped to have a peaceful family. I was raised as a farmer's daughter and had a strong character. I could not do anything oppressive to my husband. My husband's talk seemed quite convincing. Dejie seemed quite mild. Perhaps we could get along well. Besides, it had already happened. Nothing could be done to change the fact.

I had been so worried and confused during the trip. Now after the meeting and conversation, my worries disappeared. My husband was very happy with the outcome. He told the servants to prepare a good dinner to celebrate my arrival and told them to bring my luggage to my room.... During dinner, my husband filled my wine cup and Guo Dejie respectfully drank to my health. I was in a peaceful and contented atmosphere.

I had thought over the fact that if I fought against my husband's wishes and made him lose face, could he be happy? He went into the battlefield and confronted all the dangers. I should let him have a second wife to take care of him. If I couldn't stand this situation, people would talk against me. How could my husband still respect me; besides, he had helped me maintain my status as his primary wife. If my husband became cruel and unkind, he could abandon me, and I would not be able to find a place to find justice. So Guo Dejie and I got along and we had talks quite often....

[As the evening progressed] my husband saw that I didn't speak a word, and he continued, "You didn't blame me, I hope. I thought, you have a young son. It is impossible for you to live with me in this kind of army life. Our boy cannot take this life of moving from place to place with the army. Now I am in a higher position. I must have someone to care for me and someone to accompany me to social functions. You cannot do these things with your son. Now I have someone to do it for you. You can enjoy your life just paying all your attention to bringing up our son. I will be happy. We military men are very trustworthy. You will never be treated unkindly in the future."

He has not broken his word or promises. It was proven that I enjoyed honor, respect, and good fortune. But these alone cannot satisfy people, especially women. From thirty years old, I was without the warmth and love of my husband. No money or material comfort could take the place of a husband's love and warmth. For years, I was sad and grieved. But I had a strong will. I would never cry and complain in front of my husband. I had a loving son. No money could take his place. He's my own flesh and blood. I love him dearly. My husband also loved his son. He looked upon him as his treasure. Luckily, I had my son. So, our relationship, husband and wife, could be peacefully maintained....

Later in her memoir, Li Xiuwen writes about another situation in which a man took a second wife.

I felt very sorry for the first wife. Chinese women of virtue learned their understanding and tolerance from their mothers and from the Books³. Polygamy was accepted in China. Therefore, General Wang's first wife, as a good and obedient first wife, did not make any complaint about her husband taking a second wife. She willingly stayed home to take care of her in-laws and her children. Also in China, when a husband took in a second or third wife, it was the rule and custom that the first wife was in the most important position in the family and in society. In the family and among the relatives, the first wife was considered the same rank as her husband, so I was called *Jiushao*. It meant I was the

³ Classics of Chinese literature that describe appropriate behavior between individuals.

wife of number nine boy in the clan. And in public and in society, I was called *Li Furen*, or Madame Li. Only the first wife could bear the husband's family name.

A concubine had to use her own family name. My husband's second wife was called Guoshao in the family and in public called Guo Furen, which had the connotation that the lady was a concubine....

She describes the tensions between the officers' first wives and their concubines.

Those concubines called the first wife of their husbands "the woman from the farm" to show they were born in the city and knew how to dress, talk, and act in social functions. They tried hard to elevate their position in society. In official functions, their husbands needed that kind of wife to accompany them. I was never interested in social position and never wanted to fight and compete for it. I was quite young at the time. I could have given lots of trouble to Guo Dejie. To have done that, it would have given people an opportunity to talk about it and laugh at me. My husband was still good and fair to me. He didn't try to do anything mean or hurt me. It was a Chinese lady's virtue and tolerance never to give any trouble to her husband. So I gained my husband's respect....

Source: Source: Li Xiuwen, unpublished memoir. Used courtesy of the Li family.