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YUPING ZHANG
Fulbright Scholar at
BRIDGEWATER STATE COLLEGE

by William C. Levin

Fulbright scholar Yuping Zhang has brought to Bridgewater State College precisely the mix of personal and academic knowledge that the Fulbright program was founded to disseminate around the world. Since the relaxation of controls on western journalists and academics, information about the large scale events of life in China after Mao and the Cultural Revolution has been much easier to get in the West. However, to learn about the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens, we need to hear from people who have first hand knowledge, and who can speak directly to us. That is what Professor Zhang has brought to the Bridgewater State College community from her home in the People’s Republic of China.

Yuping Zhang is Professor of English in the department of Foreign Languages at Tianjin Normal University, a teacher training institution 80 miles southeast of Beijing. She is also active in the university’s Women’s Studies Center, founded in 1993 in preparation for the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women held in Beijing. Besides teaching women’s history and literature full time, Professor Zhang has also been involved in the center’s research project which, supported by funding from the Ford Foundation, has worked to document the lives of women in Hebei Province in rural north-central China.

In talks to classes and various Bridgewater area groups Professor Zhang describes her trips to these villages as having three purposes. First, she was one of a group of scholars recording the oral histories of women who had experienced little exposure to foreign culture and ideas, and whose lives by the mid-1990’s were still strongly influenced by traditional Confucian teachings and practices. These interviews were intended to examine the extent to which the lives of these women had changed over the previous few decades, especially as a consequence of the economic reforms of the early 1980’s. Interviews were conducted with women of different generations to reveal the cultural obstacles that could retard the advancement of rural women, for example, the assumption that the economic fate of the women was entirely dependent on the decisions of their men.

A second aim of the visits to these villages was to raise the consciousness of the women who lived there so they could better understand their circumstances. Yuping Zhang speaks now of the extreme excitement of the women in the villages who for the first time had the opportunity to talk in front of others about their lives. Many cried as they were told that being beaten by a husband is not normal behavior, and were encouraged to believe that their daily work in the home and fields should be valued as part of the support of the family, equal with the work of the husband.

Third, representatives of the Women’s Studies Center conducted a range of skill-training classes, such as raising livestock, dress-making and the cultivation of fruit trees. It was hoped that such skills would both contribute to the economic development of the villages and provide the women who lived there with economic power in the community.

Professor Zhang’s stories of life in rural China teach us a great deal about cultural difference, but the story of how she came to be interested in sexual inequality also teaches us about some of our similarities. In the China of the 1970’s, even in the cities, it was almost impossible for a woman to get a divorce if the husband did not want it. Yuping Zhang found during her own struggle to obtain a divorce, that by the 1990’s divorce was still very difficult to obtain and that Chinese courts still gave great weight to the opinion and testimony of one’s employer and community authorities. She understood these practices to reflect the continuing emphasis on the maintenance of families as a Chinese value. Her colleagues from the university provided vital support, legally as witnesses for her in court, emotionally with encouragement for her efforts and practically with the needs of her young son. Experiences like this make for a person’s intellectual and personal growth, and they seem to do so whether the person who is telling the story is from the United States or the People’s Republic of China.

William Levin is Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.