



A WOMEN'S LIBERATION TRIBUTE TO

William Hinton and the Women of Long Bow

by Carol Hanisch

I'm sure that when the peasant women of Long Bow held their "speak bitterness" meetings about their oppressors, they never dreamed that their method of struggle would help inspire women half way round the world to do the same.

And when Bill Hinton wrote about those meetings in his chapter on "Half of China" in *Fanshen*, I bet he never dreamed his report would be one of the several sparks that would help light the prairie fire of women's liberation in this country. But it did. We called that spark consciousness-raising, adapted it to our own conditions, and it became the primary organizing tool of our movement, a radical weapon against male supremacy, as we put it.

At our meetings in 1968 of New York Radical Women, the first women's liberation group in New York City, we used to hang a poster on the wall, made up by Kathie Sarachild, who turned us on to *Fanshen* and who was spearheading the development of feminist consciousness-raising. It read:

"Tell It Like It Is"
—the Black Revolution

"Speak Pains to Recall Pains"
—the Chinese Revolution

"Bitch, Sisters, Bitch"
—the Final Revolution

It was our way of acknowledging and uniting with those who taught and inspired us. It was also our response to those who called our meetings petty and unpolitical and group therapy.

Like the peasants of Long Bow, we "spoke pains to recall pains" to examine our lives—to get at the truth of who was oppressing us and how—so we could better figure out what to do about it. We have had our share of revisionism in the Women's Liberation Movement, and in certain circles what some women called consciousness raising was really psychological support and mutual aid and in *those* groups, it lost its political edge. But I can assure you that political consciousness raising is still being used today by radical feminists to study our current situation, to plan and critique actions, to train organizers, and to raise consciousness generally. One of the most active groups in the country, Gainesville Women's Liberation in Florida, still uses it as their organizing cornerstone.

Last year, a couple of us in the Mid-Hudson Valley where I live wanted a way to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto*. We decided that we would discuss class. Down from the shelf came *Fanshen* yet again, because it is one of the most clear and accessible applications of class analysis.

We decided to devote the first session of the group to consciousness-raising on class—starting with ourselves and figuring out how each of us fits into the economic and social class structure. We each answered the following questions:

- What economic and social class(es) do you belong to? What class do you identify with? Explain.
- Have you changed classes, up or down, during your life? Did you think or hope or fear you would? Do you think or hope or fear you will? Explain.

2 • Tribute to William Hinton

- How has your class position—economic, social and political—including any up or down change affected your life for better or worse?

In the “Rules of Engagement” of our invitation, we explained we would be using consciousness-raising “to keep the discussion rooted in concrete reality and to keep from becoming abstract and esoteric.” Of course, everyone was also required to read or re-read the *Manifesto*.

I bring this up, because I think one of the most important lessons that can be learned from the experience of the Long Bow peasants is that we absolutely must understand class forces if we are ever to *fanshen* and help others to *fanshen*. The better we understand class the fewer mistakes we will make. Understanding class teaches who our allies can be and who our enemies are. We can’t “check-mate” the oppressor if we don’t have a basic knowledge of classes, the strengths and weaknesses of each, starting with ourselves, regardless of what our own class is. I was struck during my recent re-reading of *Fanshen* by how complicated class is and how difficult it is to “settle accounts” and get it right. It’s especially hard because we live in a country that doesn’t want to admit that anyone lives here except the middle class, and we live in a time when class is further complicated by the effects of imperialism.

Another lesson that *Fanshen* points up is the absolute necessity of having a party—a dedicated leadership—that listens to the people and figures out a program

that truly speaks to our needs and dreams and at least begins to lay out how they might be achieved. Because, as Bill Hinton put it in *Fanshen*, “No individual, no matter how brilliant, could match a dedicated collective body of wisdom.” It is clear in reading about Long Bow that there are solutions to problems of both policy and organizing when you have that “dedicated collective body” learning and then dispensing its wisdom. We need that kind of leadership, that kind of party. The anti-leadership line of much of the ’60s generation has left a lot of voids.

This has been just a skimming of the surface of what activists in the United States today can learn from the struggle in Long Bow. I will close by saying that *Fanshen*, and many of Bill Hinton’s other writings, have been a way that I could learn what the Chinese revolution is really like in its everydayness and the connection between that everyday work and the grand scheme. Bill, your 80th birthday seems a good time to say that we’re *really* glad that you were born, and *really* glad you made those trips to China and shared the struggles in Long Bow with us with such deep insight and wonderful clarity. Thank you.

The above was delivered a panel presentation at a conference at Columbia University, April 3, 1999, entitled “Understanding China’s Revolution: A Celebration of the Lifework of William Hinton. It was co-sponsored by the China Study Group, Columbia University East Asian Institute, *Monthly Review* Magazine, US-China Peoples Friendship Association, *China and the World* Magazine, and friends of Bill Hinton on the occasion of Hinton’s 80th birthday.