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## Women of the Long March (Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles)

Yik Yi CHU

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**Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles. *Women of the Long March*. St Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1999. XIX+(1)+308 pp.**

In recent years, women's history has aroused much interest of scholars, students, and the general public. At first, researchers focused on the life of women in western societies. The topics of concern were the status, responsibilities, social circles, and aspirations of these women. Gradually, this research trend catches the attention of writers of Asian history and culture. The subject matter has been the discrimination of Asian women in their paternal societies. At the same time, the literature reveals the feelings and dreams of these women. *Women of the Long March*, written by Lily Xiao Hong Lee 蕭虹 and Sue Wiles, is an effort to portray the unusual hardships and sufferings of three Chinese women, who dared to struggle for their ideals and sacrificed for the communist revolution.

Moreover, *Women of the Long March* examines a difficult period in Chinese communist history. From 1934 to 1935, the Chinese communists escaped from Jiang Jieshi's (Chiang Kai-shek's 蔣介石, 1887-1975) encirclement, fled for survival and ended up in Yan'an in Shaanxi province. The Long March tested the limits of human capabilities, endurance, and emotions. It was a tortuous nightmare for both men and women. *Women of the Long March* is a valuable study of three women who survived an almost impossible ordeal. They encountered the unbearable, the unthinkable, and the unspeakable. If one of the objectives of women studies is to acknowledge women's contribution to society, *Women of the Long March* certainly draws attention to a significant record of history. More importantly, the history of women of the Long March was little known to students in the western world.

As a record of the Chinese communist history, *Women of the Long March* addresses two important questions. Firstly, did the Chinese Communist Party treat its women so fairly as it claimed in its official history? Secondly, why were these women willing to endure all these hardships? Regarding the first question, the authors seem to believe that women of the Long March could not get rid of their inferiority label and the discrimination. He Zizhen 賀子珍 (1910-1984), wife of Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung, 1893-1976), did not receive the respect and attention that she deserved. She developed mental problems, and was subsequently deserted by Mao. For many years, she led a



life of almost in exile in Moscow. At the same time, she suffered from “negative *guanxi* (connections),” as her former relations with Mao prevented her from any important assignment. So was the case of Kang Keqing 康克清 (1912-1992), wife of Zhu De 朱德 (1886-1976). Kang aspired to become commander for the communists, but her husband did not like the idea of having women in the army. As the authors comment: “The negative effects of *guanxi* were, however, equally strong. No matter how great her ability, a woman who was married to a prominent man could not rise to a position of real power. . . .” (p. 202)

As for the second question, the authors try to see from the perspective of the Chinese women. They tend to refute the casual interpretation, and refer to an “intriguing issue of what Westerners see as the blind obedience of Chinese communists in the face of the Communist Party’s clear failure to fulfil many of its early promises” (p. x). Instead of emphasising blind obedience, the authors argue that idealism and loyalty were the reasons explaining the compliance of the women. On page xi, it writes: “Having identified themselves as holding the same ambition, they then agreed that in order to realise their aims they must abide unquestioningly by the decisions of their leaders.” Described as “by nature lively and optimistic” (p. 46), Wang Quanyuan 王泉媛 who came from a peasant family had idealistic visions of the communist revolution. Such belief explained her willingness to endure the torture of the enemy, and to remain faithful to the communist movement.

*Women of the Long March* is enjoyable to read. One tends to worry about the three main characters, to sympathise with them, and to share their concerns and anxieties. The book also includes portrayals of other women, their relationships and problems. The readers will have an in-depth understanding of the Long March and a vivid picture of the lives of the Chinese communists. Throughout the book, the authors try to re-evaluate some traditional writings of the Long March, and to give their own interpretations. If more Chinese sources were available, *Women of the Long March* would be able to come closer to the reality of the time.

Yik-yi Chu 朱益宜

Hong Kong Baptist University