
Self-Cultivation of the Socialist New Person in Maoist China: Evidence from a Family's Private Letters, 1961–1986

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ABSTRACT

The Maoist creed depended upon a large core of devout, dedicated believers who sought in their personal lives to abide by the revolution's teachings. Based on close reading and careful analysis of 679 private letters from 1961 to 1986, this article explores the self-cultivation of socialist personhood by a politically devout married couple and their close relatives, who shared with one another how they lived and felt. A tension between personal concerns with family life and an ideologically charged commitment to personal political progress are identifiable in many of the letters and provide a key to understanding the rise and fall of political commitment and socialist personhood over the course of two decades. The conjugal letters reveal that within this family the husband strategically chose a discourse of class struggle and the wife a discourse of gender equality, and each utilized politically prescribed language to push for their own agenda within the family. It will be seen how the combination of their concerns with family life, the tensions entailed in the gender discourse, and the rise of materialist concerns in the 1970s eventually contributed by the 1980s to their abandonment of communist ideology and self-cultivation.

An important part of the global communist movement of the twentieth century was an effort to reform and remold the mind, moral character, and behavior patterns of every person so that a new type of personhood could be created in support of the communist ethos. The most ambitious and influential examples were the campaigns to create the “Soviet new man” in the former USSR and the “socialist new man” in China and to “let them all become Che” in Cuba.¹ Most

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1. We are aware of the gender implications of this terminology, and hereafter we replace “man” with “person.”

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existing studies on the making of socialist new people in China and elsewhere, however, focus on how the Communist Party-state sought to shape the behavioral norms of people through various institutional changes and through the images of socialist new people in the arts, literature, and propaganda discourses.² What remains elusive and understudied is the subjective experience of people who strived to remold themselves (or resisted doing so) in light of the official image of the new personhood. It is difficult to judge to what extent political activists actually thought and acted when they recount their memories years later. The lack of reliable information from the Cold War era on the subjective experiences of PRC residents has contributed to an emphasis among Western-based scholars on top-down and institutional approaches to changes in China. Anita Chan's *Children of Mao* is a notable exception, as she delves deeply into the psychology of former Red Guards and political activists.³ Yet the recollections of such interviewees are also inevitably affected by their reflections and justifications of their own actions in the past.⁴ Missing are the complicated and often contradictory moral experiences of the Chinese individual in real time.

The present study aims precisely at exploring the experiences of a married Chinese couple, plus their closest relatives, in the process of receiving, replicating, and internalizing official ideology, as they endeavored to cultivate themselves into socialist new people. The focus on self-cultivation is apparent when reading through their voluminous correspondence, comprising 679 private letters that were recently published.⁵ These letters provide a unique source on the personal communications, reflections, and social actions of flesh-and-bone individuals, written in real time rather than as memories.

2. Yinghong Cheng, *Creating the "New Man": From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009). See also Theodore Hsi-en Chen, "The New Socialist Man," *Comparative Education Review* 13, no. 1 (1969): 88–95; Irene Dölling, "'We All Love Paula but Paul Is More Important to Us': Constructing a 'Socialist Person' Using the 'Femininity' of a Working Woman," *New German Critique*, no. 82 (2001): 77–90; John G. Gurley, "Maoist Economic Development: The New 'Man' in the New China," in *American's Asia*, ed. E. Friedman and Mark Selden (New York: Pantheon, 1969); Michaela Kelemen and Dirk Bunzel, "Images of the Model Worker in State-Socialist Propaganda and Novels—the Case of Romania," *Culture and Organization* 14, no. 1 (2008): 1–14; Elena Krevsky, "Arkadii Gaidar, the New Socialist Morality, and Stalinist Identity," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 54, no. 1–2 (2012): 113–32; and Anna Krylova, "Imagining Socialism in the Soviet Century," *Social History* 42, no. 3 (2017): 315–41.

3. Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985).

4. Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

5. Zhang Letian and Yunxiang Yan, eds., *Personal Letters between Lu Qingsheng and Jiang Zhenyuan, 1961–1986* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). The two published volumes represent only a tiny part of a vast valuable collection of personal letters, diaries, work journals, and other primary materials that have been amassed by Zhang Letian and his assistants and kept at the Center for Data and Research on Contemporary Social Life at Fudan University in Shanghai. The number of collected personal letters alone had grown to 480,000 as of November 2018.

This extended family belonged to a rather elite group of well-educated professionals and lower-rank cadres who benefited from the upward mobility accorded by the party-state and thus were more likely to be committed to various social engineering projects, including the cultivation of socialist personhood, albeit suffering the hardships caused by family separation. This social group included millions of people. Their political loyalty was particularly important to the party-state during the Maoist period, and their professional skills became a valuable asset of the party-state in the reform era. The personal letters of Lu Qingsheng, his wife Jiang Zhenyuan (hereafter Lu and Jiang), and their relatives are representative of the changes in mentality experienced among this important social group and, in this light, enable us to better understand the rise and fall of socialist moral engineering as a whole.⁶

Inspired by David Barton's and Nigel Hall's edited volume *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*,⁷ we take the writing and exchange of personal letters as a kind of social practice in which the participants and the activities they write about, as well as the texts per se, need to be examined in their social context. In the following pages, we will first briefly introduce the letters' authors, the content of the letters in the larger social context, and the general patterns of self-cultivation that reveal a tension between personal concerns with family life and an ideologically charged commitment to political progress. This politically committed family consciously engaged in self-cultivation, and we will focus on the conjugal dialogue between Lu and Jiang, especially their discourses about class consciousness and gender equality. Both discourses were part and parcel of the official ideology of socialist new personhood. But we will also show that the gender discourse between Lu and Jiang eventually contributed to dissolving the socialist subjectivity. In concluding, we will argue that although self-interest was temporarily overshadowed by political activism and personal growth was seemingly molded into self-cultivation of a socialist new personhood, the thoughts and behavior of this couple were not permanently influenced heavily by the powerful party-state and communist ideology. On the contrary, the pursuit of family happiness and material comfort gradually superseded the communist ideology during the 1970s and triumphed in the daily life of Chinese individuals by the 1980s—and the socialist new personhood dissolved from within the self-cultivation process.

6. A similar social group on the lower rungs of society consisted of the left-behind spouses and children of state employees in the countryside, who enjoyed certain privileges but also suffered from family separation. How to retain their political loyalty was a top concern of national leaders when they decided to launch rural reform in the late 1970s. See Yunxiang Yan, "The Impact of Rural Reform on Economic and Social Stratification," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 27 (1992): 1–23.

7. David Barton and Nigel Hall, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999).

THE LETTER AUTHORS AND THEIR SELF-CULTIVATION ENDEAVORS

The published collection contains 202 letters written by Lu to Jiang (first his girlfriend and later his wife) during the quarter century from 1961 to 1986. There are 62 letters from Jiang to Lu; 55 of these were written in the years 1964–66, but the bulk of Jiang’s letters from other years did not survive. We will focus on these conjugal letters between Lu and Jiang, while making reference to the couple’s correspondence with their siblings, children, and other relatives whenever relevant; these “kin letters” number 415 letters in total.⁸

Lu and Jiang wrote so many letters to each other owing to the fact that, between 1961 and 1986, they were involuntarily separated by work assignments for nearly 16 years and had to rely on letter writing to communicate. Lu and Jiang had been classmates in college and first began to exchange love letters when Lu was sent to intern in a different province in June 1961. They graduated in the summer of 1961 and were both assigned to work for the Ministry of Metallurgical Industry in Beijing, with Lu in the Division of Nonferrous Metals and Jiang in a ministry research institute. The couple got married in September 1962 and had their first daughter in 1963 and their second in 1972. Starting in August 1961, Lu was assigned to work in various provinces as a member of the ministry’s inspection team, and except for a short period in 1963 he worked in places far from Beijing until 1967. Jiang spent most of the first four years working in Beijing, but she was also sent to work in Gansu province and then in Liaoning province from June 1966 to January 1967. From 1969 to 1973, the couple were separated for several periods ranging from one to several months due to work assignments. In early 1977, Lu fell into political disgrace and was expelled from Beijing to work in a small tin mine in Hunan Province. After trying for years to move back to Beijing, Lu eventually gave up, as he explained to Jiang in a letter of June 1, 1986: “Going to a new work unit in Beijing, I would have to restart and work harder. . . . Life is so short; is this worth the effort?”⁹

The case of Lu and Jiang is by no means an exception; instead, involuntary and prolonged family separations were rather common among cadres, technical professionals, and college graduates during the Maoist era. These people tended to be better educated, politically committed, and trusted by the party-state, and thus they were assigned to important work places that were often far away from their

8. Due to miscounting of some letters in the original hand-written form, we mistakenly wrote in the introductory chapter of the published collection that the entire collection consists of 774 letters (see Yunxiang Yan and Zhang Letian, “Introduction,” in Zhang and Yan, *Personal Letters*, xxv) and were unaware of the error until the collection was published. We would like to apologize to our readers for the mistake and confirm that the accurate number of letters is 679.

9. Zhang and Yan, *Personal Letters*, 207. Hereafter only the date of the letter and page number in the published book will be indicated in parentheses in the main text whenever we cite letters.

family. “Going to wherever the state needs me to go” was a slogan accepted by many university graduates during the 1950s and 1960s. They were all classified as part of the cadre strata in the state employment system, and many of them were indeed promoted to be officials. The upward mobility of this social group, however, was offset by the inhumane institutionalized practice of family separation. Strict enforcement of the household registration system and the nature of the work-unit system prevented couples from reuniting once they were assigned to work and lived in separate places. The human suffering of family separation eventually caught the attention of the central leadership in the early stage of the post-Mao reform era, especially when the party-state wanted to mobilize well-educated professionals to contribute more to the modernization of the country. On January 21, 1980, the central Party Organization Department teamed up with several ministries to issue an official notice aiming to resolve the family separation problem.¹⁰ The State Council issued another document on December 8, 1989, stating that although more than one million cases of family separation had been solved in the past decade, more efforts needed to be made to fix the remaining cases, especially among intellectuals and professionals.¹¹

The family letters of Lu, Jiang, and their relatives should also be read in the context of radical political campaigns under Maoism. As they recounted in their letters, Lu and Jiang witnessed the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–58 while studying in college. Starting in early 1962 Lu spent more than two years in rural China as a member of a cadre work team to carry out the Four Cleans and Socialist Education Campaigns of 1962–66. Both of them enthusiastically participated in the Great Cultural Revolution of 1966–69, but Jiang and her two younger sisters gradually withdrew from political activism after 1967 due mainly to the class-based discrimination they encountered. Lu and Jiang’s elder sister Zhencong remained politically active through the early 1970s. When Lin Biao, Mao’s hand-picked political successor, died during his attempted escape from China in 1971, Zhencong was affected because her husband belonged to the military faction under Lin’s leadership. Lu was promoted to a bureau chief position during the subsequent campaign called “Criticizing Lin Biao and Confucius” (1974–75), which was a political maneuver by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and her associates (known as the “Gang of Four”) against a group of high-ranking veteran officials. When the latter returned to power after Mao’s death in 1976, the Gang of Four were arrested, and in 1977 Lu, along with many activists who had been promoted in previous years, was held responsible for the destructive actions of the Cultural Revolution and subsequent political campaigns. Quite ironically, socialist new

10. The document was introduced in detail in *Laodong Gongzuo* [Labor Issues], no. 3 (1980): 11–12.

11. “Guowuyuan guanyu jinyibu jiejie ganbu fuqi liangdi fenjue de wenti” (State Council notice on further resolving the problem of family separation among cadres); see <http://www.chinabaik.com/law/zy/xz/gwy/1332617.html>, accessed February 2, 2019.

persons like Lu became sacrificial lambs in the state-led transition from the previous political line of class struggle to the new national project of economic growth and modernization.¹²

Born in 1936 to a poor working-class family in Hunan province, Lu grew up as one of the born-red activists on whom the Maoist political line of class struggle and continuous revolution relied. He joined the Communist Party at a young age and was appointed Party secretary of the Party branch in his college class. He continued to climb the political ladder in his work place until he fell into the wrong political camp. His wife Jiang was born in 1937 to a merchant family in Changsha, Hunan Province, and bore the political stigma and suffered the disadvantages of her father's negative class label "capitalist."¹³ This difference in family origin created a politically unequal foundation for Lu and Jiang's marriage, wherein Lu enjoyed the superiority of being born red, while Jiang (as well as her siblings) had to work to overcome the "original sin" of being born into the exploiting class (more on this later). Yet Lu, Jiang, and other authors of the family letters accepted with the same intensity the political ideology and the prescribed language of thought reform and self-cultivation. Their subjective experiences in the rise and fall of socialist personhood from the early 1960s to the late 1980s were an aspect of their lives that they held in common.

The institutional shaping of socialist new personhoods started in the Yan'an Rectification campaign in 1942, in which the undesirable qualities of human nature in each member of the revolutionary force in Yan'an were identified and purified through ritualized meetings of studying party documents, self-criticism, and soul-searching reflections in public. This is known as "thought reform," a distinctive Chinese invention to remold human nature.¹⁴ The Yan'an model was carried out nationwide through a thought reform campaign in 1950 that targeted intellectuals and well-educated professionals. Afterward, thought reform was continuously used as an effective tool by the party-state to remake the subjectivity of Chinese people, reaching its peak during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–69. Prolonged study sessions of Party documents and Mao's writings, soul-searching meetings of guilt sharing and self-criticism, intensive mutual criticism in small groups, rituals of attacking the personal character and dignity of those targeted—labeling them "backward elements"—and organized activities of

12. For insightful analysis on the impacts of these political campaigns on the political activism and moral transformation of Chinese youth during this time, see Chan, *Children of Mao*; Madsen, *Morality and Power*; and Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village under Mao and Deng*, expanded and updated edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

13. For detailed analysis of the class label system, see Jonathan Unger, "The Class System in Rural China: A Case Study," in *Class and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China*, ed. James L. Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 121–41.

14. See Cheng, *Creating the "New Man,"* 65–70.

emulating official models were the main techniques used to develop a socialist new personhood and have been well documented in various studies.¹⁵

These institutionalized methods pushed from above can be seen in the personal letters. Lu, Jiang, and their siblings described their attendance in these various political activities and their daily work routines. For example, Lu reported to Jiang the good news that he was made a model member of the cadres who were sent to carry out the Socialist Education Campaign in Shanxi province and asked his wife, “Please write me more frequently, reminding me and helping me [in pursuing political progress]. I will send my reflections to you so that you will know how I am doing here and also pointedly make some suggestions” (September 14, 1964, 68). Jiang’s younger sister Zhenmin wrote about a political assessment meeting: “The purpose of this is to enable us to see our problems and clarify directions so that we could progress faster” (May 1, 1965, 389). In their letters, they discussed learning Mao’s writings and Party documents and enjoying revolutionary literature and films: “I hope you two study Mao’s works every day, uplifting your political consciousness. . . . Did you take notes?” (from Jiang’s elder sister’s husband Mr. Xie, September 11, 1965, 397). They updated each other on their participation in political campaigns (February 15, 1965, 82; June 12, 1966, 108; June 18, 1966, 261) and shared their experiences of emulating role models, as, for example, when Zhenmin wrote, “I posted Chairman Mao’s words on my bedside wall and read them every day; I also write diaries to examine myself every day; I want to learn from Lei Feng forever” (April 1, 1963, 325).¹⁶ Moreover, the letters reveal how they tried to reform their own thoughts through self-criticism and mutual criticism as well as their proactive efforts to raise other family members to a higher level of political consciousness. Lu wrote to Jiang, “You must unconditionally obey the work allocation by leaders; regardless of whether the assigned tasks are small or big, you must like them all” (June 23, 1964, 61).

In most of the letters written in the 1960s and early 1970s, there is at least one paragraph of political content, and in some cases such discussion dominates the letter exchanges. Overall, we estimate that about 15–20 percent of the content of their letters from this period is related to the cultivation of a socialist new person. The authors also updated their life situations to each other, expressed personal feelings, chatted over mundane details of family life, and dealt with financial hardship through mutual help (requests for monetary help appear regularly in the letters).¹⁷

15. Theodore Hsi-en Chen, “The New Socialist Man,” *Comparative Education Review* 13, no. 1 (1969): 88–95; Chan, *Children of Mao*; Cheng, *Creating the “New Man”*; and Madsen, *Morality and Power*.

16. The language that these individuals used in private letters is almost identical to the political discourse in public life. Due to space limitation, we will refrain from citing the original texts.

17. The primary concern of material life expressed in the conjugal letters is how to manage the household budget, balancing among daily food consumption other necessary purchases such as shoes and clothes, and supporting younger siblings in school. Content-wise, more than half of the discussions between Lu and

The most intensive discussions on politics and self-cultivation took place in the early phases of the Cultural Revolution, describing how Lu, Jiang, and Jiang's sisters enthusiastically participated in the mass movement. Lu and Jiang reported their own activities to each other (e.g., August 11, 1966, 115; June 12, 1966, 259), exchanged ideas and strategies, and encouraged each other to carry on the struggle (September 11, 1966, 122). Very soon after the start of the Cultural Revolution Lu wrote to Jiang, "I believe I am the true leftist, because I had long been critical of the leaders and the bad things they did. . . . I will stop criticizing my leaders because they were not big targets. I plan to write something and send it directly to central leaders like Bo Yibo, Chen Boda, Jiang Qing, and Kang Sheng" (August 19, 1966, 116; also June 18, 1966, 261). Jiang wrote back to Lu a month later: "Since you stood out, you should fear nothing. . . . I always believe that we must be completely revolutionary once we joined the revolution. . . . We must also keep ourselves alert. We are not cowards, but we should protect ourselves so that we can eliminate the enemies" (September 15, 1966, 271). Although less frequent and intensive, the Jiang sisters also wrote to each other discussing their views and early experiences of the Cultural Revolution (August 16, 1966, 411), including their frustrations when the younger sisters were excluded by the Red Guard organizations because of their class origin: "Because I always had good performance in work, I became a core member when the Cultural Revolution first started [in my school]. . . . Then I was excluded from participating in the re-election of the [school's] Leading Small Group of the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guards because of my bad family origin. . . . Why can't I be an activist during this campaign? I just cannot accept it" (September 6, 1966, 412). By the winter of 1966, Jiang and two of her sisters started to cast doubt on the extremism of the Red Guard movement. Jiang complained, "I heard that they wanted to change the rules about traffic lights: the red light is to mean drive through and the green light is to stop. I cannot understand this and think it's too superficial; the most important should be thought reform. . . . I just do not believe that people with the family origin of workers or peasants are born that noble and pure" (August 9-?, 1966, 270). In contrast, Lu continued to ride the political tide, and by the early 1970s he had climbed to an important leadership position inside his work unit.

Taken as a whole, the 679 letters provide us with first-person testimonies and in some cases self-reflections on the making and unmaking of the socialist subjectivity among Lu, Jiang, and the group of professionals they represented—who had received college educations under Maoism, were politically committed, and thus were also regarded by the party-state as one of the leading forces in building socialism. Realizing the impossibility of analyzing all the details in these let-

Jiang are about their marital relationship and family conflicts, and the main focus in kin letters is personal growth in dating, marriage, and child-rearing.

ters, we conducted a keyword extraction analysis to gauge the main threads of thoughts and reflections of the letter authors. In descending order of frequency, the most commonly used terms in the 679 letters were *family* (used 2,323 times), *work* (645), *money* (621), *the Party* (464), *child* (342), *the Youth League* (247), [*political*] *thought* (185), *the organization* (i.e., *the Party* or *youth league* or *work unit*, 141), *revolution* (127), *struggle* (88), *politics* (87), and *progress* (85).¹⁸ Among these twelve terms, *family*, *money*, and *child* have no political meanings and stand in sharp contrast with the other nine terms, which also appeared regularly and frequently in all official propaganda and government documents. The two sets of words reveal two parallel lines of thought and action reflected in the letters, that is, how to live a good life by way of marriage, family, and materiality, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how to cultivate oneself as a socialist new person by way of political progress, ethical self-cultivation, and devotion to working for the party-state. Both sets of discourse demanded the attention, devotion, and actions of the individuals and, consequently, created a tension between family concerns and political progress that was frequently discussed in the letters.

During the 1960s, efforts to suppress self-interest and one's material desires were near-ubiquitous in the letters. Repeatedly, Lu, Jiang and their younger siblings committed themselves to reshape themselves into the officially defined socialist new personhood by way of pursuing political progress and controlling personal desires and self-interest. It should be noted that Lu, Jiang, and their relatives spent much more space updating, discussing, and strategizing about routine family issues in everyday life, which amounts to about half of the overall content of the letters. Yet during the 1960s, they invariably regarded family concerns as not only secondary but also somewhat less legitimate, and they often reminded each other that the top priority was their active participation in political activities and complete devotion to their work. When Jiang complained to her elder sister Zhencong about Lu's lack of tender caring, Zhencong replied that her own husband behaved in the same way because he was busy at work. But as long as he was loyal to the Party and devoted to work for the revolution, Zhencong always forgave her husband on these unimportant private matters (e.g., December 30, 1962, 308–9; January 10, 1963, 313). The examples of this kind of discourse are simply too many to cite; suffice it to quote an example from a letter from Zhencong when she tried to mediate a conjugal problem between Lu and Jiang and teach them how to keep a good balance between work and child-rearing: "You absolutely should not pay too much attention to child-rearing; loosening up your efforts in work and social activities [for the sake of your child] is not right. Our children are only a part of our life, we cannot spend our main energy or all our

18. Due to space limitation, we had to cut from the final draft a detailed technical analysis of these keywords.

energies [on child-rearing]. We cannot spoil them; we should devote more time and energy to our work” (December 22, 1963, 353).

As a young mother and a professional, Jiang struggled between a strong devotion to study and work and a motherly attachment to her daughter, who was being taken care of by her grandmother in another province. On many occasions, she complained that having a child had slowed her political progress and work achievement but also admitted her emotional attachment to her child is stronger: “I do miss our child. Whenever I saw other people’s children, my feeling became really strong and tense. . . . I have done my duties and I did not let our child down. I indeed said I would rather let her die, but that was just an angry expression when I was driven mad. I thought that if I had no child I would not have anything to worry in my heart. Yet, my emotion of missing our child is much stronger than several colleagues who are in the same situation. Yet, I had not felt happy because of our child. This is contradictory but it is not contradictory at the same time” (March 30, 1965, 251). Jiang shared with Lu her emotional loss after sending their daughter to Jiang’s parents’ home, but she also told her husband how happy she was because now she could concentrate on study and work (June 10, 1964, 227). In another letter she declared, “Our child is not anyone’s private property! She belongs to the state!” (January 8, 1965, 247).

POLITICAL PROGRESS, GENDER EQUALITY, AND THE NEW SOCIALIST FAMILY

Delving into the contents of letters, we found that, beneath the all-too-familiar language of communist ideology and beyond the commonly seen patterns of self-cultivation of socialist new personhood, the couple also used the officially prescribed language and the politically endorsed actions to push their own agenda, to deal with personal issues, and ultimately to cultivate a different self that is not in the official script.¹⁹ The conjugal letters between Lu and Jiang provide an excellent means to analyze this as the couple were trying to score points against each other in a rather tense marriage by using different formulas within the official language copied from Party propaganda and political study meetings. A melodrama started as early as their dating. In his second love letter to Jiang, Lu wrote,

As for why I love you, it is very simple and clear. We have studied together for five years, which is the foundation of mutual understanding and trust. We both trust the Party, devote ourselves to work for the Party, and are willing to improve ourselves under the Party’s education (we all had made impressive progress these

¹⁹ See Fengyuan Ji, *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao’s China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).

years, but this is first and foremost the result of the Party's education). This is our shared foundation of thought. Although you have shortcomings, and so do I. These are precisely the foundation for us to help each other and progress together. (June 27–28, 1961, 6)

The above paragraph reads almost like a political contract that locks the two parties into a long-term commitment. To be fair, we must add that Lu did make a long and touching confession of his love to Jiang before this paragraph, but in this short paragraph Lu seriously laid out what constitutes love and marriage and used this declaration to secure their relationship on the basis that Jiang shares his views. As indicated in the preceding section, Lu possessed strong political capital and an excellent class origin, and he always liked to take the lead in the self-cultivation process, even to the extent of introducing this into his dating, marriage, and subsequent life with Jiang and other members of the extended family.

Regrettably, we do not know how Jiang responded to Lu's letter because her letters in 1961–63 did not survive; yet, we can reasonably assume that Jiang was convinced and accepted Lu's authority in politics and ideology when she decided to go ahead with the marriage, because in the second earliest of all her surviving letters Jiang still requested of Lu: "I hope you will help me [progress]. . . . You are stronger than me in many aspects, such as political thought, awareness of class struggle, and work capability" (April 20, 1964, 215).

In his letters to Jiang, Lu regularly emphasized class consciousness and class struggle, one of the main themes in Maoism. He told of examples of class struggle, especially the suspicious behavior of bad-class people, and reminded his wife of the important work he was carrying out in a mercury mine in Guizhou province (December 24, 1961, 46). He asked Jiang to make more efforts to prepare herself in the increasingly serious class struggle:

What we saw and heard in the countryside during the past half year (I cannot share this with you in this letter according to Party regulations, and I will tell you when I go home) made us realize that the class struggle in both cities and the countryside is serious, contentious, and radical.²⁰ Did not Chairman Mao tell us, if we do not pay attention to these [class struggle incidents] we will be in danger! . . . I am going to ask the Party to extend my time in the countryside so that I can be shaped better. (October 7, 1964, 70)

20. This is the only time that the privacy and safety of letter writing was mentioned, but it shows that at least Lu was aware of the danger of describing the dark side of social life. It is possible that Lu and others exercised self-censorship to a certain extent because they rarely discussed issues outside of the official political map.

Jiang was receptive to Lu's preaching, and, once she got involved in political activities during the early days of the Cultural Revolution, she became even more convinced by the discourse of class struggle: "If we do not engage in this battle [class struggle], we will risk losing the Party and the country. Thinking this way, I demanded myself to devote more time and energy to work and the struggle" (June 16, 1966, 260).

As socialist new personhood is defined first and foremost by political standards, Lu's pride and self-appointed mission to teach and liberate Jiang and others placed him in a superior position in their courtship and marriage. When he started dating Jiang, Jiang's elder sister, Zhencong, who was also a Communist Party member, immediately spotted Lu's prospect for political advancement. She recommended that Jiang should accept Lu's courtship because he was a veteran Party member who had received the Party's education for years and was politically mature (June 16, 1962, 301). When their marriage ran into problems, Zhencong tried to mediate and said, "After all, he is a Communist Party member, and we should trust his political qualifications" (September 28, 1965, 399). Jiang's younger sisters were also very receptive to Lu because he was a model of political devotion. For example, in a letter to Lu, Jiang's third younger sister, 15-year-old Jianghui, looked up to Lu as a role model, seeking political advice and asking Lu to help her and her elder sister Jiang to progress (November 19, 1961, 287–88).

In Lu's mind, the most important step in cultivating oneself into a politically advanced new person is to join the Party and then everything else would fall into the right place. Thus he frequently urged Jiang:

As my comrade and wife, I am expecting you to make more political progress and professional improvement. I think you are rather passive in pursuing political progress, being content with an average level. If one is not bold, not aggressively progressing, not striving toward the top, one is wrong and unacceptable [politically]. As for joining the party organization, your idea is "if I am qualified, the Party will proactively recruit me." This is unrealistic, and this shows your lack of inner drive, that: "I must consciously and eagerly devote myself to the great course of the Party." Do you agree with me? (February 5, 1964, 48)

On some occasions Lu wrote to his wife as if he was a Party leader educating someone under his jurisdiction:

[Your] standing and views are much clearer after the anti-rightist campaign; [you] played a leadership role in the Communist Youth League, relying on the organization and proactively helping other comrades, and you did your work. . . . But I think there are still shortcomings measured by a stricter standard: (1) you are an overaged member of the Youth League now, so what do you do? To cultivate ourselves as revolutionaries, you should proactively apply to join the Party. . . .

(2) Your father was a businessman and now still benefits from the dividend paid by the state. You must have the correct thought [toward your father]. You must know that personal feelings and a political stand are different; you should draw the line [with your father]. (3) You must constantly lift yourself up in political thought and consciousness. . . . Class struggle, cultivating the socialist new thought and ideology, reform, and burying the old thoughts and ideology, all of these are reflected in our relationships with our family members, relatives and friends. (July 22, 1964, 66)

Party membership is a tangible measure of political consciousness recognized by the party-state and the first step to career promotion as well as materialistic benefits, but these potential personal gains were all suppressed by the political activism discourse.²¹ This also featured prominently in letters by other family members. Like Lu, Jiang's elder sister Zhencong took great care to urge Jiang to engage more in political movements, and Jiang in turn pushed her younger sisters Zhenmin, Zhenliang, and Jianghui to work hard and join the Communist Youth League. Jiang's younger sisters all expressed a strong wish to achieve political progress and make themselves qualified successors of the revolution. In the earliest letter to Lu that is available, Jiang's 15-year-old younger sister Jianghui said, "There is no one in the world who does not want to progress; I too want to progress and progress very fast; I wish to become a member of the Communist Youth League, but I am not qualified and I do not know what to do" (November 19, 1961, 287). To help her raise the level of her political thought, Jiang urged Lu to send a copy of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* to her younger sister in Hunan, saying, "I always hope my younger sisters can become better in political thought" (February 25, 1965, 249). Lu indeed took cultivating his sister-in-law as one of his priorities and kept writing letters to Jianghui until she was recruited into the Youth League. When another sister, Zhenmin, finally joined the Youth League, Jianghui, who was a few years junior to Zhenmin but joined the Youth League earlier, wrote to congratulate Zhenmin but also reminded her not to slow down in the pursuit of political progress, because "it is a lifetime task to establish the correct views and cultivate oneself." Her recommendation was that, "regardless of your own qualifications, you should boldly and actively apply to join the Party, you should have such an ambition, let the Party organization test you, and receive the Party's help as early as possible" (March 24, 1966, 407).

In the early stages of her relationship with Lu, Jiang felt politically inferior because of her class origin and completely accepted Lu's authority in politics and ideology, as shown in her letters (April 20, 1964, 215). She felt guilty for not being a Party member: "I might not be qualified to join the Party in my entire life. Why

21. Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

did you marry me? You cherished me, and I must thank you for that” (July 24, 1964). At Lu’s request, Jiang reported her activities at her work place and offered criticism of colleagues: “I am not happy with the work in our small group and I think the main problem is [the group] is not paying attention to thought work. The team head Liang is okay, but her thought is incorrect. . . . I have a lot of questions lately but have nobody to discuss them with; the only thing I can do is to engage in self-struggle within myself” (June 16–17, 1964, 228).

Jiang’s inferiority is shared by her sisters as well, because they all experienced bumping into the glass ceiling of class labels when they tried to pursue political progress, such as trying to join the Communist Youth League or the Party (April 23, 1962, 298; December 20, 1964, 380). One of her younger sisters was 25 years old before she was finally recruited into the Youth League, having tried unsuccessfully for years (March 10, 1964, 358). Intriguingly, Jiang and her sister made thorough and drastic attempts to reform their thoughts because they believed they were born with incorrect thoughts and thus must work extra hard to be rid of them. For example, in a touching letter, Jiang’s third younger sister shared with Jiang her painful experiences of being discriminated against due to her class origin, but at the end of the letter she reconfirmed her determination to become a Party member (January 26, 1965, 384).

Unlike her husband Lu, who paid more attention to pragmatic strategies of moving ahead politically, such as exhibiting loyalty to Party leaders (June 23, 1964, 61) and cultivating a good image in his work unit (June 23, 1965, 97–98), Jiang seemed more devoted to reforming her own thought and was more dedicated to studying Mao’s books: “I felt regret that you did not bring *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*. I have no idea what you can study. I cannot send it to you because the book I ordered has not arrived” (May 30, 1964, 223). When discussing the importance of physical exercise, Jiang told Lu that, learning from her colleague’s experience, she used studying Mao’s *Selected Works* to motivate herself to engage in physical exercise and has effectively improved her health (June 28–30, 1964, 231). Acutely aware how political campaigns could land some people in serious trouble, when Jiang did not hear from Lu for a while she worried that her husband might have run afoul of the Party. But she also mused that he instead might have sacrificed his life for the collective interest like the model heroes: “I was worried something might have happened to you. What could happen? Did you make some mistakes and been punished by the Party? Or did you lose your life when trying to salvage the collective property or save another person (we were told the heroic story of a colleague who jumped into icy water to save a child)?” (June 10, 1964, 225).

As time passed, however, Jiang began to notice Lu’s weakness in acting as a socialist new person despite his strong rhetoric, such as Lu’s tendency to seek comforts in life and his indulgence in good food. She warned her husband: “being born red and previously having suffered hardship cannot guarantee you’ll [al-

ways be good]. You must keep tempering yourself, measuring yourself with a strict standard” (May 1, 1964, 219). It seems that Jiang cherished honesty and would not have liked to be forced by her husband to do something that she regarded as insincere. While accepting the importance of Party membership and also feeling guilty for her lack of progress in this, Jiang began to view membership as something more than a sign of political progress and career advancement. It also signified an ideal that related to her own family life, an area in which as a couple they fell short:

As for joining the Party, you often discuss this with me, but you never explain to me the purpose of doing so, and you only say it is for career development. But my opinion is that I am not qualified, especially in the domain of family life. . . . [How can I be] a Party member who cannot first resolve the problem in the family? If I joined the Party, then a family that consists of two Party members should be exemplary. But, as I said above, our differences and conflicts have yet to be resolved. . . . Otherwise, if I apply to the Party with these thought problems, I am merely an opportunist. I will never do that.” (June 26, 1966, 262)

The problem of family life that Jiang referred to in this letter was part of a prolonged discussion and debate the pair had regarding gender inequality, domestic violence, and the proper conjugal relationship in accordance with the new socialist values. In particular, the couple quarreled over Jiang’s attitude toward Lu’s mother, who had come to visit them shortly after they had their first daughter. Lu accused his wife of not being sufficiently deferential toward her mother-in-law. Jiang disagreed because she, as a well-educated state employee, certainly should not be expected to behave like a docile daughter-in-law in the countryside. Outraged at having lost face, Lu slapped Jiang, knocking her down. During the subsequent two and half years, Jiang frequently demanded that her husband apologize and denounced him as a wife-beating man who should be disqualified from Party membership or from being a cadre. She reiterated her points in most of the letters she wrote from early 1964 until the Cultural Revolution broke out in mid-1966, an event that caused her to redirect her attention to the mass upsurge. In these letters Jiang would often bring up that incident of domestic violence and went on to point out her husband’s other wrongdoings, and the list of complaints grew as their correspondence continued. Lu made self-criticism in each responding letter and related his wrong behavior to incorrect political thought and his insufficient self-cultivation. In a highly politicalized yet still passionate way, Lu attributed his male chauvinism and his acts of violence to the remnant influence of feudalistic thoughts and his patriarchal bias as well as to his failure to be a proper Party member (May 6–7, 1964, 54–56; see similar confessions and apologies in July 14, 1964, 65; and May 30, 1965, 93). Their discussions moved almost flawlessly from politically charged discourses on revolutionary love and mar-

riage, gender equality, and the new socialist family, on the one hand, to age-old domestic issues of filial piety, the maintenance of good relations with family members and friends, obligations of reciprocity, and family finances, on the other hand. Both Lu and Jiang seemed unaware of the disjuncture between the demands of socialist personhood and mundane family matters, all the while competing with one another to elaborate on what a socialist new person's married life should be and exploring how to reform Lu's feudalistic and patriarchal thoughts.

The discourse of women's liberation, gender equality, and a new type of conjugal relationship based on mutual respect and equal partnership was officially part and parcel of the Maoist campaign to build a socialist new personhood that would transform the society and culture, even though the ideological endeavor often fell short in practice.²² This tends to be overlooked in studies, most of which put an overwhelming emphasis on public life, especially political life.²³ What the family letters illustrate is that women's liberation and gender equality constituted part of the self-cultivation of a socialist new personhood during the 1960s and 1970s. This was particularly appealing to women like Jiang but also involved men because of the overall power of the official ideology. In their conjugal dialogue over the issue of gender equality, Jiang stood on higher moral ground and used the official discourse of correct love and a revolutionary conjugal relationship to counterbalance Lu's superiority based on his class origin. It is the gendered understanding of Party membership and politics that eventually led Jiang to first cast doubt on the qualifications of Lu as a Party member (May 1, 1964, 219) and then to rethink Maoist radicalism in Cultural Revolution (August 29, 1966, 269).

In this collection of letters, Jiang was not the only one to prioritize this gendered perception. The primary reason that Zhencong, Jiang's elder sister, was so loyal to the Party was rooted in her personal experience and her strong belief that the Party liberated women and offered them the possibility of a happy life. As she reflected in a letter to Jiang, "If it was not because of the liberation, the girls in our family would not be able to make it. Look at our happiness today" (July 4, 1975, 506). In a long and passionate letter to Lu, Zhencong recalled her teenage years when economic hardship and her father's patriarchal ideas almost deprived her of a chance to attend middle school. With the help of her teacher, she fled the family to resist a parent-arranged marriage and joined the

22. Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

23. A noticeable exception is Gail Hershatter's focus on female virtues among labor models. See Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

People's Liberation Army. Having received the Party's education, Zhencong saw it as her responsibility to help liberate her younger sisters from the feudalistic thinking of their father, who objected to girls' education and participation in public life. "Why did I receive so many corporal punishments [from my father]?" Zhencong told Lu. "In short, it was all because I wanted to live an independent life and wanted the same for my younger sisters, too" (December 19, 1965, 403–5).

In Zhencong's mind, marriage and gendered relationships are not private matters and should be nurtured and maintained in the larger context of cultivating a socialist new personhood and building communism in China. When she learned of Jiang's problems with Lu, she first tried to mediate and advised both of them, employing the official discourse of revolutionary marriage and family, emphasizing her trust in Lu's political qualities and class awareness (September 28, 1965, 399). When Jiang's conjugal relationship dropped to its lowest point, she wrote to both her elder sister Zhencong and Zhencong's husband Mr. Xie. In response, Zhencong suggested that Jiang should seek help from the Party organization because the Party is like a mother who takes care of all her children. Zhencong also noted the influence of bad class consciousness when Lu, as a Party member, lost his temper defending the feudalistic ideology of filial piety and hit his wife. She also reiterated to Jiang that family and children are less important than the revolutionary cause and one's work. Zhencong's husband Xie, who was a middle-rank military officer, pointed out in a separate letter that if Jiang could no longer sustain her marriage with Lu she must first report to the Party organization of her work unit and get official approval for any further action. This is because "it is no longer merely an issue of a conjugal relationship, it is a relationship between individual and organization, involving Party discipline" (July 20, 1963, 341).

Lu, Jiang, and others all shared the same belief that the new family should be a politically progressive platform on which to improve themselves and live their lives. Not knowing how to create such a new type of family, they followed the official ideology. Zhencong's husband asserted to Jiang that there is no reason why the socialist new family cannot resolve its own internal problems, and the best way is to study Chairman Mao's writings such as "On Contradictions," "Where People's Correct Thought Come From," and so on (September 11, 1965, 397).

Unlike in political campaigns or formal study sessions in work places, in the private setting of family the practice of gender equality and marriage based on equal partnership was considered the most important way to reshape one's moral self. The discourse of class consciousness and the discourse of gender equality worked together to bolster the political loyalty of Lu, Jiang, and Jiang's sisters and motivated them to engage in further actions of thought reform and the re-making of moral self. Notably, too, the gendered aspect of socialist new personhood borrowed from traditional family culture by placing the Party and Mao in

the position of loving parents, while rebuilding the concept of the family as an affective medium and extension of the Party organization.²⁴

WANING OF POLITICAL DEVOTION AND SELF-CULTIVATION

The letters reveal an important shift in the minds of Lu, Jiang and other members of the extended family, reflecting political changes at the national level in the early 1970s. Chief among them were the death of Lin Biao, who had been endorsed by a Party Congress to be Mao's official successor but was later accused of being a traitor, and the rise of Mao's wife to national power, which undermined the political faith of Lu, Jiang, and many others who used to be true believers of Maoism and communist ideology.²⁵

Thus in the second half of the 1970s their letters' focus on political activism gradually gave way to discussions on personal matters. Words relating to politics and communist ideology disappeared almost entirely. A telling example in this regard is that, in the 146 letters among Lu, Jiang and their relatives during the period 1975–79, the word “progress” was mentioned only twice with reference to the progress that Jiang's younger sister Jianghui had made at a vocational school. Given that in the Maoist era, making political progress was the ultimate important measurement in cultivating socialist personhood, the disappearance of the word “progress” in the letters of 1975–79 indicates that they had already abandoned their efforts even before the post-Mao era commenced. All of the letter authors in this collection also stopped discussing thought reform, devotion to the revolutionary cause, Party membership, and other activities of self-cultivation.

Instead, they began to reflect on and reveal disappointment and disillusionment with their previous political activism. In a letter to her younger sister in 1975, Jiang reflected: “Time has passed like this year after year, and there is truly not much meaning. I might have unhealthy thoughts, but I cannot change myself. I cannot see any bright color [in life], only darkness” (April 15, 1975, 502). In 1976 Jiang's elder sister Zhencong, who had always been the diehard ideologue and loyalist to the party-state, lamented that she was unable to catch up with the changing political tide and felt “I was fooled and cheated” (February 23, 1976).

They began to more openly pursue the extended family's own interests. Zhencong, Lu, and Jiang had already engaged in a collective effort to find an urban job for Jiang's youngest sister so that she could avoid being sent down to the coun-

24. Rosemary Roberts, “The Confucian Moral Foundations of Socialist Model Man: Lei Feng and the Twenty Four Exemplars of Filial Behavior,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 23–28.

25. See Chan, *Children of Mao*, 185–203; Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth (1968–1980)*, trans. Krystyna Horko (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2013), 81–92.

tryside after her graduation from middle school. In 1974–75 they “pulled a few strings” and offered gifts in order to open the “back door” and obtain an urban job allocation for the youngster. Jiang’s younger sister Jianghui, who had written a passionate letter at age 15 in which she sought political advice from Lu and had encouraged her siblings to pursue Party membership in the late 1960s, was in 1977 actively seeking a backdoor connection so that she could help her husband’s brother purchase steel beams, which were highly regulated by the government, for a local factory (February 23, 1977, 521). In 1980, personal connections enabled Zhencong to help her two younger sisters move to more desirable work units (January 10, 1980, 545), but their distant association with fallen leaders also negatively affected her husband’s and her career development (February 1, 1980, 547).

Alongside the visible process of political disenchantment with communist ideology and political progress emerged a pursuit of consumer goods and a more comfortable life. The relatives had always been consistently short of money, and throughout the period for which we have letters they had had to rely on mutual aid to purchase necessary household items. Lu, Jiang, and Jiang’s elder sister Zhencong also had regularly sent money from their meager salaries to Jiang’s parents and younger sisters as financial support. To deal with hardship and shortages of goods, they all led a spartan and deprived lifestyle, trying to avoid even the smallest expense, such as buying a toothbrush (April 20, 1963, 328) or using hot water (May 31, 1962, 299). Initially they had accepted this and had sought, as part of their political devotion, to live in a frugal and ascetic fashion, making strict and sometimes even harsh efforts to control self-interest. However, from the 1970s onward, this effort waned. The Jiang sisters became more sensitive toward material shortages and were frustrated with hardships. From 1975 onward, as the letters gradually became increasingly apolitical, the attention of Jiang and her sisters shifted away from political subjects to an entirely new dialogue focusing on such matters as how to buy much needed but scarce consumer goods through backdoor connections, improving knowledge and skills and applying them in work, making money through moonlighting, and assisting the children with their education and college examinations.

How to buy desired goods through personal connections occupied the minds of all the members in this family group. For example, Zhenmin, one of the younger sisters, wrote in 1977 that she was busy seeking personal connections to purchase daily necessities such as cooking oil (May 12, 1977, 521). A year later, in 1978, Lu and Jiang discussed a plan to purchase a television (February 29, 1978) and eventually realized their dream in late 1980 (September 18/1980), and Jianghui wrote to Jiang at least three times, hoping to utilize Jiang’s advantage in a prestigious work unit to purchase a Japanese television (August 3, 1980, 550, September 15, 1980, 551; and November 26, 1980, 553). The government’s decades-long failure to satisfy consumer demand struck a fatal blow to the social-

ist utopia when communist asceticism lost its ideological appeal. A similar process also occurred in other former communist countries.²⁶

During this period Lu faced serious political problems. He had risen during the Cultural Revolution only to find himself in the wrong political camp, and after Mao's death in 1976 he was punished, in 1977, as a purported follower of the Gang of Four (November 14, 1979, 177–80). Due to his much deeper involvement in politics, Lu's reflections, regrets, and reorientation were the most interesting and touching. In a letter to Jiang dated May 5, 1978, Lu recalled that as early as 1975 the couple had discussed the implications of political rumors at the time, and Jiang had expressed discontent with the destructive impacts of frequent political campaigns. He told Jiang, "I now admit that I was not as good as you in terms of being aware of the Gang of Four's control. But we both had doubts [toward them], and this was only between you and me. [In 1976] I was scared that I would be in trouble if I was accused of spreading rumors and rebutted our early doubts. . . . I truly believe [Chairman Mao] wanted to knock down Deng Xiaoping and launch class struggle over political lines in the Party" (160–61). He regretted his unwise and even blind devotion to political campaigns and acknowledged the brutality of class struggle (160–61). He described his personal experiences after his fall in 1977, of going through interrogations, false accusations, and public humiliations in struggle meetings, which eventually drove him temporarily to mental disorder (December 28, 1977, 152–53; November 14, 1979, 178–79) and then exile to work at a tin mine in the impoverished province of Guizhou in southwest China. Interestingly, Jiang still trusted the Party when Lu had lost faith in the late 1970s (September 13, 1979, 277), a possible indicator of a different approach to and understanding of the socialist new personhood in particular and the Party in general.

Lu eventually realized that only professional expertise was useful (September 6, 1979, 175), considered his previous political enthusiasm a "blindness in faith" and "foolishness in loyalty" (March 3, 1981, 189), and decided to devote himself to professionalism by self-studying technical knowledge, English, and Japanese (September 13, 1978, 167; April 28, 1980, 184). He also told his daughter that the requirement for political progress in college entrance exams is meaningless and only provides a back door to those who have connections (March 20, 1983, 590). Lu quickly remade himself into a successful engineer in charge of important projects at the tin mine he had been exiled to (August 31, 1982), began to moonlight as a technical expert in another local enterprise, and collaborated with his wife Jiang in making extra income out of sideline projects (January 14, 1985, 205). The last conjugal letters reveal that Jiang had reconciled with Lu in the

26. Krisztina Fehérváry, "Goods and States: The Political Logic of State-Socialist Material Culture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 2 (2009): 426–59.

1980s, and Lu had earned so much money in the local tin industry that he proudly told his wife not to be concerned with money anymore (June 1, 1986, 207; June 18, 1986, 208; June 27, 1986, 209). In short, while their conjugal relationship and family life triumphed in the 1980s, socialist new personhood disappeared.

CONCLUSION

Lu, Jiang, and their relatives represented an important social group of well-educated professionals who went through their formative years under radical Maoism and believed what they were taught. In the 1960s, the self-cultivation of socialist personhood was truly believed and practiced, as their letters reveal. They truly believed it was their only way to move ahead and realize their individual ambitions as well as building socialism for the country. Studying Mao's writings and Party documents, emulating official models, participating actively in political campaigns and devoting oneself to work as a salvation of the self were all inculcated and practiced by Lu, Jiang, and their relatives (and possibly also by a majority of Chinese individuals from all walks of life during that time). It is therefore important to unpack and scrutinize how these individuals, ideologically sincere and politically loyal to the party-state, sought personal growth in the self-cultivation of socialist new personhood.

While all of the members of this extended family demonstrated a great degree of sincerity and devotion to the cause, seeking to make themselves qualified successors of the Communist Revolution, the born-red Lu seems to have been more pragmatic and sometimes even opportunistic, deliberately playing upon the advantages of being born red and a Party member, the kind of person the Party trusted and relied on for the continuity of class struggle under Maoism. Handicapped by the bad class label of their father (a capitalist), Jiang and her sisters had to try much harder to prove themselves equally trustworthy and thus plunged deeper into the Maoist thought-reform process. As a consequence of this preexisting difference, Lu opted to accept, internalize, and replicate the discourse of class struggle more than anything else, whereas Jiang and her sisters regarded the discourse of women's liberation and gender equality as a guiding force in re-making the moral self from within.

The ideal of the socialist family, along with state-sponsored family changes such as free choice marriage, an equal conjugal relationship, and attacks on feudalistic patriarchal power played a pivotal role in enabling individuals to internalize Communist ethics and act out self-cultivation of socialist new personhood on a deeper and more intimate level. Lu and Jiang began dating with the shared idealism of submitting their marriage and family life to the great cause of communism. In subsequent years, their ethical reflections, soul-searching dialogues, and many of their actual social actions were all conducted within the framework of their nuclear family, albeit often in the context of family separation

and written communication. Working closely together with the family of Jiang's elder sister and brother-in-law, Lu and Jiang were also committed to helping Jiang's four younger sisters and one younger brother receive the Party's education, develop correct class awareness, make political progress, and eventually become qualified successors of the revolution.²⁷ The Party, instead of seeking to preempt the family organization with politically mobilized discussion small groups, as Martin K. Whyte noted,²⁸ actually made the new socialist family part of its all-encompassing system of mobilizing and organizing Chinese people during the heyday of Maoism. The private and affective site of the family provided a more nurturing environment for women to proactively use the discourse of women's liberation and gender equality as a guiding force in cultivating their new moral self while replicating the discourse of class consciousness and class struggle at the same time. As indicated in the above analysis of the letters by Jiang and her sisters, the gender equality discourse ultimately helped them reshape their inner selves and enabled them to overcome the obstacles of disadvantageous class origin under Maoism. After the party-state dropped the class-struggle discourse near the end of the 1970s they continued their pursuit of family happiness and self-development in the post-Mao reform era.

The family factor is very important in the Chinese case (as opposed to, say, the case in the former Soviet Union) because the Chinese personhood is first and foremost defined by and constructed through family relationships;²⁹ the letters help to explain why it is difficult in China to conceive of the socialist new personhood without the socialist new family. The existing scholarship on socialist personhood under Maoism tends to focus on the institutional factors in the public sphere, but the private letters in our study reveal that the family is an equally important enabling site for both the rise and fall of socialist new personhood.

Another implication we can draw from these letters is that the socialist personhood collapsed from within. By the late 1970s, family concerns had replaced political progress in the mental world of Lu, Jiang, and arguably the vast majority of others who had once been politically devoted. In the 1960s, Lu, Jiang, and many others who had been true believers tried their best to suppress various concerns related to family life or personal interest in order to concentrate on the pursuit of political progress. They even took pains to remind themselves that family issues like child-rearing should always be secondary to political activities and work for the Party.

27. They ceased their efforts halfway for the two youngest siblings in the late 1970s because of the radical changes in the party-state's leadership and policies.

28. Martin K. Whyte, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

29. Yunxiang Yan, "Doing Personhood in Chinese Culture: The Desiring Individual, Moralistic Self, and Relational Person," *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (2017): 1–17.

Their strict and sometimes even harsh efforts to control self-interest and personal emotions were at a peak during the early stages of Cultural Revolution from mid-1966 to 1967 and then gradually waned when the Maoist ideology and the discourse of class struggle were pushed to the extreme and become totally irrational, as evidenced by secret discussions of political rumors and suspicions about Maoist socialism in letters between Lu and Jiang as early as 1975. The political failure of radical Maoism and consequent disillusionment broke the spell of communist asceticism on Lu, Jiang, and their relatives. They suddenly realized that their daily lives were barren, poor, and uninteresting, and they immediately turned their attention and energy to the pursuit of material goods and other life comforts, as shown in the letters from the mid-1970s onward. The Maoist asceticism had been an integral part of the official ideology of socialist new personhood and at the same time an important means of practicing self-cultivation. The collapse of the official ideology immediately stripped away the holiness of Maoist asceticism, and the persistent constant shortage of material goods awakened a realization among the elite and rank-and-file alike that socialism had actually economically failed, which in turn eroded the idealism of the socialist new person from within.

To reiterate, Lu, Jiang, and millions of individuals like them had been making great efforts to shape themselves into socialist new personhoods during the Maoist era while barely managing the difficulties in real life brought on by self-sacrifice and self-exploitation. They did so because they believed in the bright future of Maoist socialism that would eventually provide them with satisfaction in their careers and a happy family life. What they experienced and believed in was complicated: they were neither brainwashed followers of radical Maoism, nor selfless devotees to the Communist cause, nor calculating opportunists operating under the guise of socialist personhood. The rise and fall of socialist personhood was a dynamic process in which individuals such as Lu, Jiang, and others were constantly making and remaking themselves to the fullest extent they could. The Maoist theory of class struggle, the doctrine of the Party as a revolutionary vanguard, and the ethics of Communist asceticism served as key elements in the official ideology of the socialist new personhood. When in 1979 the party-state declared the end of class struggle, set the development of the national economy as a new priority, and promoted the new value of “getting rich is glorious,” the socialist new personhood was officially abandoned in both state ideology and practice. From a bottom-up perspective, the private letters examined in this article enable us to see the key elements that first sustained and then undermined the socialist new personhood. We have traced the self-cultivation efforts of Lu and Jiang (recognizing that millions of other Chinese were in similar circumstances) and also their eventual disenchantment with the Communist ideology and consequently the collapse of the socialist new personhood from within, a silent revolution that occurred during the 1970s before official policies underwent radical changes.