Ah Bing and Her 'Sisters'

Since the "normalization" of Sino-American relations in 1979, most U.S. scholarship on China has focused on politics and economics. But historians have also learned much about how ordinary Chinese variously have coped with the rigors of everyday life. Here, journalist Alice Greenway describes the plight of rural women in Canton before World War II, and how one woman, Ah Bing, joined others, through a network of "sisterhoods," in vows of spinsterhood to escape forced marriage and poverty.

by Alice Greenway

In 1932, Ah Bing was a 16-year-old girl from Lunan, a small village in southern Guangdong (Canton) Province, China.

In that year, she journeyed to the city of Shih-lung, to perform a deeply solemn ceremony in the Buddhist temple there. First, she tied up her long black hair in a single bun. Then, in the presence of other girls and older women, she knelt before a statue of Kuan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, and vowed never to marry.

"If I marry," Ah Bing said, "give me nothing, give me trouble, make me unhappy, and don't give me any sons."

In performing this ritual, Ah Bing became a ***sou hei*** woman—literally, "one who dresses her own hair" (unlike traditional brides, who have their hair dressed for them). To her mother's deep disappointment, Ah Bing left Lunan, and joined a Buddhist sisterhood in Shih-lung, in Tung Kuan county.

During her adult life, Ah Bing lived and worked not only in her native China, but in Singapore, Hong Kong, and the United States. Throughout, she kept her vows to Kuan Yin.

I had known Ah Bing since 1967, when my family moved to Hong Kong. I was just three years old at the time. As an ***amah*** or domestic servant, Ah Bing helped my parents care for the house and raise me

Rural women in China, as this Yüan dynasty (1279–1368) painting of an autumn rice harvest shows, have long done much of the hard field labor.

and my two sisters. In conversations during the 20 years that she lived with us, Ah Bing shared with me the story of her life.

Ah Bing's story reveals much about life in early 20th-century China. It details how Chinese society in general, and the institution of marriage in particular, favored men over women. Her personal history also reflects the suffering that so many women endured, and suggests why so many Chinese women from her area (one out of every 10 in Tung Kuan county) chose not to marry.

Some Chinese commentators have hinted that such single women were sexually promiscuous, or lesbians perhaps. But Ah Bing's story suggests that in choosing a single life, these women were nothing of the sort. They were just trying to make a better life for themselves.

It was not easy to survive, after all, in China during the 1930s. Already, the country had experienced tremendous political upheaval. The revolution of 1911 not only overthrew the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1912), but inaugurated one of the most strife-ridden periods in Chinese

history. Neither the republican government (1912–28) nor General Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang regime (1928–49) managed to win the support necessary to subdue competing warlords at home or resist aggressors from abroad. The Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1931 and eventually pushed deep into southern China. The political chaos presented ordinary rural folk like Ah Bing with hardships and opportunities that they had not known before.

Daughters for Sale

Not all hardships, of course, were new. Chinese society had long regarded females as second-class citizens. Poor families, for example, often earned money by selling their most disposable possessions, such as their young daughters. "In my village, they didn't drown girls, they sold them," Ah Bing once said. "If the father or brother was sick, they would sell a daughter, and use the money to take care of him."

In fact, Ah Bing's mother had tried to sell her daughter three times. "When I was eight years old, or 10 maybe, my mother decided that she had too many girls, so she tried to give me away to a friend," Ah Bing said. "It's the same as if your mother had a dress that she didn't want, and someone else did. She would give it to them." The two older women, however, could not agree on the transaction. Ah Bing's mother finally gave her daughter away to Ah Bing's married cousin, who lived with his family in the nearby city of Kunchow. "I stayed with them for two or three years," Ah Bing said. "They were rich, but didn't have any children. My main job was to fetch water."

As adults, Chinese women did not necessarily enjoy any more freedom than they did as children. Parents and matchmakers arranged marriages, with little if any consultation with the bride-to-be. Men and women married not because they loved each other, but to unite families and continue the family line.

The girl's parents obviously wanted a healthy, wealthy, and handsome son-in-law. "Parents would have to be careful that the man was good," Ah Jen, Ah Bing's friend, once told me. "Especially that he was clean. They would have to make sure that he had good skin, that he wasn't a leper."

Needless to say, the ideal groom was rarely available. Ah Bing, like many Chinese women, feared that she would be matched with an opium addict. Opium addiction was common, and an addict could consume all of the family's resources in financing his habit. He might even resort to selling his hapless spouse into prostitution.

A Chinese wife faced several other threats. Some suffered the

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Ah Bing (left) and Ah Jen at the Kowloon Railroad Station in Hong Kong. Last year, the two "sisters" visited the colony, where they met in 1950.

humiliation of having to compete with one, two, or even three concubines for their husband's attention. And those who lived with the husband's family often labored under the demanding strictures of overbearing mothers-in-law.

Ah Bing recalled, for example, how her niece Ah Sun was driven out of the house by her husband's mother: "Ah Sun's mother-in-law talked too much, never letting Ah Sun sleep, making her work all the time, and then telling her that she was lazy," Ah Bing said. "So, Ah Sun left her husband and son, and ran to Hong Kong without telling anyone. Her mother-in-law bought her husband a girl to be his second wife. The new wife takes care of Ah Sun's boy. Ah Sun sends them cloth, sugar, and oil from Hong Kong."

Chinese women could not easily escape their troubles; by law, they could not ask for a divorce. A man could divorce his wife for barrenness, adultery, jealousy, loquacity, theft, incurable disease, or disobedience to his parents. Chinese society protected women only by prohibiting a man from divorcing his wife if she had mourned his parents for three months, if she had no relatives to return to, or if she had married him when he was poor and he was now rich. If a husband did divorce his wife, he owed her no means of support.

Considering Ah Bing's family life, it is easy to see why she did not favor getting married. Two of her three brothers and a brother-in-law were opium addicts. Two of her four sisters were left behind by husbands who went abroad to find work. "At that time, there were not enough jobs for people," Ah Bing said. "That's why so many people went to Hong Kong." As the men departed to take jobs abroad, Chinese wives often ended up supporting their children and aged parents by themselves. As a result, the status of women rose during the 1930s. Many were able to earn relatively respectable wages working in garment factories, and in other small cottage industries.

Even so, Chinese women did not readily choose a life of spinsterhood. In China a woman was expected to fulfill her roles as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. By deciding to remain single, she would sacrifice her place in the home, the support of her family, and the possibility of future ancestor worship. She was not even permitted to die in the family's house, for fear that her hungry ghost would remain, causing crop failures, business losses, infertility, injuries, or even death. Single Chinese women often led degrading lives, sometimes as beggars and prostitutes.

Ah Bing, however, had an alternative. After taking her vows before the statue of Kuan Yin, she could live with other *sou hei* women in a Buddhist *chai t'ang*, or vegetarian hall, in Shih-lung. Ah Bing estimated that about 70 such establishments for spinsters were scattered around Guangdong Province, providing single women with a place to stay, and with a network of friends.

The Patron Saint

Only four or five women lived in Ah Bing's *chai t'ang* house, which could accommodate up to 15 guests or visitors. Separate rooms provided space for cooking, eating, sleeping, and praying. "The women who lived there were mostly older ladies who sewed and did inside work," said Ah Bing. "In the morning, we would chant, and I also prayed to a statue of Kuan Yin every day before meals. I asked Kuan Yin to make me clever."

Life at the *chai t'ang* was not easy. Every morning, Ah Bing said, she and the other women "had to polish the tables, the kitchen, the floors until everything was clean. We couldn't go to work until we had finished all the work at the Kuan Yin house, which was at about five o'clock." Ah Bing also had to work outside the house to support herself. "Another girl and I found jobs on the other side of the canal, making tiles for roofs," she explained. "At six-thirty, we would reach the canal and a boat boy would take us across in a *sampan*. We returned at five o'clock at night, and then had to cook dinner and clean up. It was hard work. We made about 30 to 40 cents a day."

Kuan Yin, the patron saint of spinster houses, and the goddess

"who looks down upon the world and hears its cries," played a central role in these women's lives. She was the female manifestation of the the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara—a merciful Buddhist savior, who postponed his entrance into Nirvana to alleviate suffering. Kuan Yin was called upon by midwives who delivered babies and performed abortions. Her closeness to the people made her even more popular than the Buddha himself. According to the *sou hei* women who prayed to her, Kuan Yin had taken a vow of chastity at an early age. She held fast to that vow, despite the torments visited upon her by a disappointed father. In the end, she prevailed and was worshipped.

The *sou hei* women observed other Buddhist traditions too. To join a Buddhist "family" in a *chai t'ang*, a spinster had to pay obeisance to a *shih-fu*, or teacher, don Buddhist robes, and declare her faith in the Buddha and the Buddhist scriptures.

Emigrating to Singapore

The family that she joined reflected all of the patriarchal aspects of the traditional family. *Shih-fu* connoted a male figure, and was considered such, even if the teacher was female. Likewise, the *shih-fu* called his or her disciples "sons," their peers "uncles," and the *shih-fu*'s *shih-fu* "grandfather." "Because you are not married, you make a temple family," recalled Ah Bing's friend Ah Jen. "In the temple, you have a father, an uncle, and a son. You are called gentlemen, because if you are not married, you are like a man."

To make a better living, Ah Bing went to Singapore, when she was 20 years old, in 1936. At that time, many Chinese men and women were emigrating to the British crown colony to find work. Ah Bing's sisterhood helped her go to Singapore by providing contacts there.

A young sailor, Ah Bing explained, gave her a boat ticket to Singapore. "He was a friend of an old lady at the Kuan Yin house. He was what we call a *seui haak* [male sailor]. The sailors brought news of job opportunities, and acted as guides, messengers, and as money lenders for women traveling from Canton and abroad. The boat to Singapore took seven days and seven nights. When I got there, they locked me and some other girls up in a room. I was young, and they thought I was being sold. After three days, they gave us our papers and let us go."

Ah Bing was only one of many women who journeyed to Singapore during the first half of the 20th century, when the population of Chinese women there tripled. The decision to leave China was a momentous one. Few of the female émigrés had traveled farther from their homes than the distance to the nearest market town. Many of the women were unmarried or had left their families behind, and, once in Singapore, they often formed sisterhoods that were modeled after the Buddhist *chai t'ang*.

After her voyage, Ah Bing lived in one of the many boarding

Ah Bing and her great-niece, Ah Fun, in front of Ah Bing's house in Lunan last year. When Ah Bing was young, many Chinese girls sewed clothes for small textile firms. Today, Ah Fun earns about $1 a day working in a blue jeans factory.

houses that lined the streets of Singapore's Chinatown. Within this district, the Cantonese lived in a neighborhood called Water Buffalo Cart. "I stayed at the coolie [laborer] house," Ah Bing recalled. "They gave me food and help. They didn't sell people. Only women lived there. They helped me find a job."

Once Ah Bing found work, as an *amah*, or domestic, she stayed at her employer's house, but continued to pay "one dollar Singapore money" each month to maintain membership in the boarding house.

"I would come back to visit, or if I was sick," Ah Bing recalled. "I got very sick from the water in Singapore. I had big feet, and my legs were swollen. At one point, I didn't eat for seven days. My *shih-fu* told me that if I didn't eat meat, I would soon get better. That is when I began my present diet.

"About 70 people belonged to the coolie house, but many slept at their employers' houses. Some people lived at the coolie house and went to work daily. Some old ladies who had retired lived there too. If they died, their families would have them buried. If they had no families, they usually had some money saved, or else we could sell their earrings and rings to pay for the funeral."

In Singapore, the women's boarding houses functioned as both an

informal employment agency and as a trade guild. Employers, most of whom were English, often found *amahs* by going to a boarding house. Members of the house kept tabs on both employers and employees. An English employer who abused or exploited an *amah* would have difficulty finding another, because her "sisters" would boycott English housewives who had gained a bad reputation.

Working for the Japanese

The sisters also looked out for one another after the Japanese captured the British colony in February 1942. "When the Japanese came, a Chinese lady told me to go away. 'If you are staying with the English,' she said, 'they [the Japanese] will cut off your head.' I didn't want to leave. If the Japanese bomb the house, I thought, I will hide under a table.

"[The next morning] when I woke up, two friends came to my house. It was six o'clock in the morning. 'Run, run,' they said. 'The Japanese are coming today. No one is at the coolie house anymore. Don't care about your money.' Two weeks later I returned. The house was demolished. I was still owed one month's pay, a little less.

"Then I got a job working for some Japanese people. I cooked and cleaned. They were all good people. Same as all other people, some were good and some were bad. I cannot be angry, because there are plenty of good Japanese people. How do you know who bombed your house? When the English came, I had to find a new job. Aya! I forgot how long the Japanese stayed! They left Singapore on the eighth month, and on the twelfth month, I went to Canton for Chinese New Year. I didn't want to live in Singapore any more. I stayed at my mother's house for 10 days, and then I went to the Kuan Yin house for three to four months. Then I went to Hong Kong."

Ah Bing left China, for Hong Kong, in 1946. There, she joined seven other women in a smaller version of the large sisterhoods, called *sahp jimui*, or "10 sister groups," and went to work as an *amah*. Members of this small sisterhood included widows, *sou hei* women, and *mh lok ga* women, who were married but had chosen not to live with their husbands. Many of these women shared the same dialect and background, but not the same religious beliefs. Thus, the *sahp jimui* were not organized along religious lines. But like the Buddhist *chai t'ang*s, they provided women with companionship and helped them find jobs. The women also vowed that they would support one another for as long as they lived.

Ah Bing's oath was tested when her sworn sister, Ah Sui, was hit by a car. "She had no mother or father," Ah Bing said. "We promised to take care of each other if we got sick. When a car hit her leg, I took care of her. I had to stop my job. I washed and cooked for her, and I got a doctor to come look at her. No money, never mind. I had enough

saved up from before."

The boarding houses and *sahp jimui* were not the only kinds of sisterhoods located abroad. Buddhist *chai t'ang*s thrived in Hong Kong's New Territories (mainland areas and surrounding islands that the British acquired in 1898), and on the colony's remote islands. One scholar estimated that in 1981 there were about 250 *chai t'ang*s in Hong Kong, each with between 25 and 40 full- and part-time members.

Ah Bing belonged to the Chung San *chai t'ang* in the New Territories. "I sent $5,000 [Hong Kong dollars] to Chung San so I could stay there and get food," she said. "I went once a year on New Year's, and sometimes for Kuan Yin's birthday. On New Year's we would eat and talk and laugh and play *mahjong*, a betting game. We also chanted, and made offerings to Kuan Yin of apples, oranges, and grapes, and we would pray to the ancestors. At night, we all slept inside. It was a big compound, with three or four houses, one of which had two floors."

Mao Burns the Altar

In 1967, Ah Bing came to work as an *amah* for my family, which was then living in Hong Kong. Since my father was a foreign correspondent, we moved often, and Ah Bing moved with us—first to Thailand, then, among other places, to Washington, D.C., and, in 1973, back to Hong Kong. The only place Ah Bing did not enjoy was Israel, where she complained that there were not "any Chinese things, no oysters, no mushrooms. I had a hard time finding things to eat."

In 1978, our family moved back to Massachusetts, and Ah Bing came with us. Over the years, Ah Bing and my mother managed to find jobs for Ah Bing's Chinese friends, Ah Gai, Ah Doi, and Ah Jen. Working in the suburbs west of Boston, they formed a sisterhood. In their free time, they traveled to Boston's Chinatown, celebrated the Chinese New Year and Moon Festival, and prepared large Chinese meals for themselves and their compatriots.

Much has changed in China since the 1930s. When the Communists took over in 1949, they abolished the sisterhoods. In a singularly unrevolutionary move, they sent the sisters back to their homes, and married life. While there are still sisterhoods in Hong Kong and Singapore, Chinese women are not permitted to emigrate. "Mao took away the Kuan Yin house," Ah Bing said. "He burned the altar. Mao Zedong said that people who don't eat meat are silly, [and that] if you don't eat meat, he wouldn't let you eat rice either. Mao said young girls must marry. For the older ones it was too late."

The Communists considered the sisterhoods, like all religious organizations, backward and feudal. This was ironic, since the sisters had, in fact, reacted against the traditional position of women. In a time of great disruption and turmoil, these women chose an alternative to married life that had allowed them to be self-sufficient.

While Ah Bing and other spinsters had departed from Chinese ways, their practices were also deeply rooted in tradition. The decision not to marry, for example, was bound up with popular sentiment in favor of chastity, and supported by Buddhist and Taoist beliefs about abstinence. The *sou hei* ceremony—in which a spinster dressed her own hair, as a bride had her hair dressed for her—exemplified the mix of the old and the new.

Ah Bing did not see herself as part of a "women's movement." Without being an activist or a proselytizer, she did gain a degree of autonomy unknown to most Chinese married women. Within the limited range of options available to her, she did dramatically improve her station in life. She outlived her four sisters and three brothers, and was able to look back on a life of extraordinary variety and accomplishment.

Ah Bing traveled widely, and managed to save her money. While her first house in Shih-lung was confiscated by the Communists, she and six friends held on to their apartment in Hong Kong, and Ah Bing had a two-story house built for herself in her native village of Lunan. In addition, she enabled her relatives back home to gain a higher standard of living. "Because of Ah Bing, our family is one of the richest in the village," Ah Lung, one of Ah Bing's nephews, told me recently. "She has helped us buy houses, clothes, color TV sets, and bicycles. She has also enabled our children to go to school, and to celebrate births and weddings in proper form."

Ah Bing died last February, and was buried in Lunan. Ironically, she left all of her property and money to seven men—five nephews, a male friend, and a brother-in-law.

Despite her achievements, Ah Bing never relinquished the Buddhist belief that life entails mostly hardship and suffering. "You can tell when a newborn baby did not want to be born, because its bottom is blue from being spanked by the Gods," Ah Bing once told me. "But when I die," she said, "they can spank me as many times as they like. I am never coming back."