

FALLING IN LOVE IN CHINA

BY MARCIA YUDKIN



ANDREW SHACHAT

SEVERAL MONTHS INTO MY year of working in China, I drew a photo out of an envelope in the privacy of my hotel apartment and blushed. The picture showed the lover I had left behind and me posing in T-shirts and shorts, with one of my legs lolling across his and his hand casually on my bare thigh. How could I let the maids see that! I thought as I reached for a scissors and snipped off the embarrassing lower portion. It wasn't until after I had propped the doctored photo on my bureau that I stopped to reflect on the strange power of China's pervasive puritanism.

In late 1983, China was a country where women dared not wear shorts in public, where "marriage" was often used as a euphemism for sexual relations, and where a film's bedroom kiss on the cheek and young couples cycling abreast on dark streets, the man's arm draped around the woman's shoulder, were signs of liberalization. And reality was not much more salacious than appearances, I learned: most urban young adults had no opportunity for sexual experience before marriage, and millions of married couples faithfully endured long separations—two or three full years, or a decade or more in separate provinces, together one month in 12.

Very little in Chinese movies, magazines, ad images, conversations, even glances and postures confirmed

that sexual needs existed before or beyond the marriage bed. My reaction to the photo showed that such prudishness could induce prudish behavior, but could the denial tame normal biological urges? Even as I appeared to adapt, my sense of deprivation mounted. "How can you bear it?" I finally burst out one day to a Chinese friend, an athletic, educated, intense man of 24, presumably a virgin. "Waiting is also a kind of happiness," he replied sagely. I shook my head in violent disagreement.

Soon I got to know another man, a tall, talented graduate student, unmarried at 29 because he dreaded a humdrum existence that would foil his ambitions. We shared our life stories and discussed philosophy, politics, families, and relationships. "If we were in the United States," I eventually confided, "I would already have tried to seduce you." "Then we're in the wrong country," Zhu brooded. He smoked in silence for a while. "But let's try," he whispered.

What ensued, however, was a courtship much more like a Chinese than an American one. We schemed, generally in vain, for a way to be alone, undetected. Ordinarily we could do no more than walk and talk, walk and talk in places where we hoped no one who knew him would see us. The usual Chinese need to dodge gossip was in our case imperative: in his field, unau-

thorized contact with foreigners was forbidden. Often I would go home without even having been able to touch his hand.

Yet as our meetings continued, he discovered and accepted my impatience and quicksilver changes in mood. I came to admire his resourcefulness and courage while laughing off his aversion to rain. "What is love? Do you think love can last forever?" became a more frequent topic of conversation. One night, after I walked him past a hotel guard who might have challenged him, Zhu turned to me with an exalted flush on his face. "My heart is pounding," he confessed. "You mean because of the guard?" "Not entirely," he replied. Then, still wearing that peculiar look, he nudged me into the shadows, touched his lips quietly to mine, and walked quickly away from the guard and me toward the bus stop.

If I thought taking that risk signaled a determination to have an affair no matter what the dangers, I was wrong. The Chinese script for romance ran otherwise. "If we're not careful now, we can only do the things once, or twice, or three times," Zhu later explained. It was my turn to flush and get flustered. I realized he was steering us toward a longer goal, one that scared me but also excited me, and the spell grew.

Zhu and I, near-strangers to each other's bodies, began pondering marriage. Trying for the permission we would need to marry in China was too uncertain, we agreed. And I had a stubborn compunction. I wouldn't marry someone without proof that we were sexually compatible, I told him. "Why?" he scoffed. "That's only ten percent, twenty percent at the most, of a relationship." As I stood taking this in, it dawned on me that the Chinese way, where 80 or 90 percent was loyalty, affection, and mutual respect, was what I had always wanted.

Back home, I am plotting for Zhu to join me in the United States. Our American movies, magazines, ad images, and some looks I get in the street have strangely little power to persuade me to have a fling in the meantime. Two things I learned in China keep company with me: sex needn't be the glue of love and waiting can also bring happiness. **Ms.**

Marcia Yudkin's book, "Making Good Private Business in Socialist China," is scheduled for publication by Foreign Languages Press.