



The "Nine-Girl Cotton-Growing Group" harvest their crop.

Girl Cotton-Growers

WANG CHIAO

AMID enthusiastic applause, a girl with long braids and wearing a colourful, padded cotton jacket walked on to the platform in the Hall of the People in Sian. The occasion was a session of the Northwest China Agricultural Forum held in December 1965. As this was the first time she had appeared before such a large meeting, Chang Kuei-fang blushed and remained speechless for a moment. Then she took hold of herself and told the delegates how the "Nine-Girl Cotton-Growing Group" had achieved record yields in their experimental field and had inspired the women in her native Wukung county to take an active part in a campaign to increase cotton production.

The "Nine-Girl Group" was formed in 1957 when the Shensi Provincial Committee of the Chinese Communist Party called on the women and girls of the province to emulate Chang Chiu-

WANG CHIAO is a reporter for the Peking newspaper *Chinese Youth*.

hsiang, a woman of Weinan county well known for the high cotton yields she obtained, and grow more and better cotton for the country. Responding to this call, nine teenage girls from the youth shock brigade of the Yung-tai advanced agricultural producers' cooperative asked for one *mu* of land from their production team for experiments.

Away with Prejudice

In the spring of 1957 the first plants grew vigorously, but they soon turned yellow. Experienced peasants told the girls, "The soil is too poor, and manure is needed right away." But the production team did not have enough for its own farm land. Where could they get manure? Chang Kuei-fang, at that time the youngest and also the most active member of the group, suggested, "Let's collect animal dung ourselves!" This was a bold proposal indeed! Never before had women in the village done such "unclean" work. The

girls rose before dawn and, without their parents' knowledge, went out to gather dung on the roads. But they were soon observed. Some people praised them but others jeered, remarking that their unseemly behaviour would prevent them from finding husbands.

When this gossip reached the ears of the parents, some scolded their daughters while others tried to stop them. The Party branch called the older people to a meeting and explained that the young people were doing the right thing in trying to grow cotton needed by the country. As parents they should support their daughters in breaking away from old prejudices. With understanding and consent thus won, the girls threw away all their fears. Every morning before daybreak they collected the dung on the stretch of road leading from their village to the nearby town. In a fortnight they had eight cartloads. As this was dug into the soil, the young shoots grew green and healthy again.

Soon there was another problem — insect pests. In their enthusiasm the girls used too much insecticide. The leaves began to droop and within a few hours yellow specks appeared on them. Advised to immediately wash the plants with water, the girls, disappointed and shamefaced as they were, hesitated to do so. Communist Party branch secretary Chang Chih-ho, who was following their work with interest, encouraged them, saying, "Failure is the mother of success. Since we experiment, we should not be afraid of mistakes. We should learn from them."

The girls carried water in pails and pans and washed the plants one by one, leaf by leaf. It was laborious but the crop was saved. In order to master the technique of cotton planting, they visited Chang Chiu-hsiang in Weinan county and sought advice from the Northwest Agricultural College and the Shensi branch of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, both situated in their own county. They also got pointers from experienced peasants.

Success in Transplanting

In the summer of 1959, many plants were battered to pieces by a violent hailstorm. The field was a sad sight. Some of the girls burst into tears. One said, "Let's stop trying to grow cotton and stay home and do our sewing." Seeing their disappointment, Chang Chih-ho called them together. "The hailstorm has broken our plants but not our hands," he said. "We must be able to withstand the wind and rain. We don't want to be like hothouse flowers."

They decided to transplant cotton plants from thickly-sown areas to the places where the shoots had died. This hadn't been done in their area before so they turned for advice to Chang Tai, an old man with much experience in planting trees. Impressed by their serious attitude, he taught them everything he knew about trans-

planting. They followed his advice carefully and most of the plants survived. The girls now had really achieved something — they had a body of experience in transplanting cotton shoots.

In their scientific experiments the girls learned how to stop rank growth. They put their findings into rhymes and ditties. This enabled them to remember what they should do at each stage and helped to spread their new knowledge through the entire production brigade. Their success attracted more and more attention and peasants came to see their experimental plot and ask advice.

Influence on Others

For six years in succession from 1957 to 1962, the "Nine-Girl Group" maintained a record yield of over 200 *jin* of ginned cotton per *mu*. In 1963 they enlarged their experimental field to 40 *mu*. Despite drought, flood and hail the yield of ginned cotton in the following three years still averaged a high 177.3 *jin* per *mu* from this greater area.

The group has become a training school for advanced workers.

Although it now has 30 members, whose average age is 16, it retains its original name. Many members have married and 22 have gone to other villages. When they leave they take with them selected cotton seed and continue their scientific experiments in their new homes. Most have become heads of cotton-growing teams while a few are women's leaders of commune brigades. Members of the group often visit those who have left, and the Party branch secretary of the brigade also invites them back every year when they all exchange notes and help one another.

Today there are 1,400 girls' cotton-growing groups in Wukung county. Last year the average per-*mu* yield of ginned cotton for the whole county was 85 *jin*, more than double that of 1964. At the National Cotton-Growers' Conference at the beginning of 1966, Wukung county was chosen as a model to show how a low-yield area can be transformed into a high-yield one. The girls of the Yungtai production brigade are now exerting an influence far beyond the boundaries of their own county.



Chang Kuei-fang (second from right) gives advice to young women from another county.