

Women in hard labour

ENTERING CHONG Wu's outskirts, the noise of labour jangles like horse-cart bells as hundreds of hammers strike chisels and granite. It could be a soundtrack from an old Hollywood film about slaves put to work in the quarries – and the reality, at least for females, in this City of Stone is not far different.

Virtually enslaved for centuries by some of the most backward customs in a repressive country, the young women of Chong Wu have hand-built the township, while the men supervised.

Chong Wu is the 60,000-strong population centre of a remote area called Huidong, the eastern portion of Hui'an county in Fujian province on China's south-eastern coast. Huidong comprises a total of seven rural districts in which about 100,000 of these women live.

A construction boom is happening throughout Huidong, and the slender serfs still do all the heavy lifting, carrying huge blocks of granite in cradles of hemp suspended from sturdy strips of bamboo. The women often work in pairs, with the block hanging between them and an arm around each other's shoulders.

Chien Chiao, head of the anthropology department at Chinese University in Hong Kong, says, "Traditionally in China, the woman's status is much inferior to the man's, but in this particular place they developed a kind of theory to emphasise the lower status of women – that they're not only physically inferior but they are rather dumb."

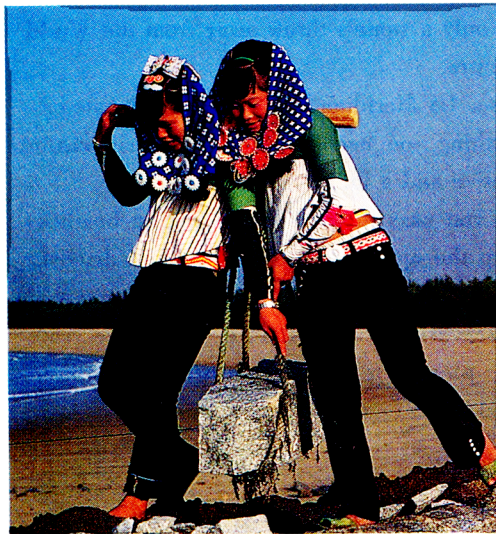
Chien says the alleged physical inferiority of the women is conveniently altered in one respect: males are said to have stronger arms and hands than females, which better suits them to the more skilled jobs of fishing and stone handicraft, while the women supposedly have stronger shoulders and therefore are better at carrying heavy objects.

Females also do all the farm work, and a bride, who must remain with her own family for the first few years of wedlock, tends the farms of both her husband and her parents during that time. The housing boom in Huidong has largely supplanted agriculture but the women still coax a few crops from the poor and rocky soil.

Officials say three groups of people will live in the new houses: managers of stone-



New houses in Hui'an county in Fujian province and, left, two construction workers.



cutting factories, fishing boat owners and Taiwanese businessmen.

Taiwan, just 180 km offshore from Chong Wu, openly hires Fujian province's fishermen to produce boatloads of contraband catch. Trade between China and Taiwan remains officially illegal, although Taiwan has liberalised some restrictions as long-standing political differences between the two entities unofficially warm.

The Huidong men who carve granite are paid an average of 40 yuan (about \$10) daily. They often earn even more as fishermen but it's stonework for which the area is famous.

Women earn about six yuan (\$1.50) a

day as stone carriers. Surprisingly, some of the income they earn is spent on themselves. A mini-industry exists to keep them in constantly varying garb and their fashions have become an integral part of the culture.

Each woman owns a minimum of 50 scarves – prices at 3-5 yuan (80 cents to \$1.30) – and some own as many as 200. The most daring facet of the women's dress in this conservative land is the short cut of their blouses, exposing the midriff. That has led to the joking description, "feudalistic hat, democratic stomach". The women also bind their breasts tightly with towelling to suppress their shape but, in contrast, they accentuate the shape of their buttocks by a tight cut in the seats of their pants. Upon marriage, the women receive a silver belt and usually get two or more teeth capped in gold as signs of their new status and for beauty.

A few women reportedly have escaped the drudgery that is their lot by being elected people's representatives to various levels of government. Some have begun to do stone carving, sanding and the other skilled work normally reserved for men. Yet none of the women seems willing to tell outsiders how she feels about her situation; even Chinese anthropologists say much mystery still surrounds them. □

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