

From the Archives

FROM A FARM NEAR SIAN

EXCERPT OF
JOAN HINTON '39 LETTER,
"FROM A FARM NEAR SIAN"



1966. Joan Hinton on a Beijing farm.

In our last issue, we shared a *New York Times* piece about Geoffrey Hinton, Carmelita Hinton's grand-nephew. In it, Hinton, known as the "Godfather of Artificial Intelligence," warned about AI's dangers, following his much-publicized resignation from Google. At the time, we also thought about Joan Hinton '39, daughter of Carmelita. Joan, a physicist, worked on the Manhattan Project, and then, horrified at the use of the atomic bomb in Japan, became an activist for peace, and in reaction to the Cold War's emergence, moved to China and spent the rest of her life there on a dairy farm. In a 2002 interview with NPR, Joan said, "I did not want to spend my life figuring out how to kill people. I wanted to figure out how to let people have a better life, not a worse one."

Joan and her husband, Erwin "Sid" Engst, designed and built China's first mechanical farm, inventing and refining agricultural systems and equipment, including a continuous-flow automatic milk pasteurizer, managing a herd with 200 cows over the course of more than four decades.

Joan Hinton's contribution to a January 1963 publication, "Letters from China," by Anna Louise Strong, captures this moment in time. We share an excerpt of Joan's letter, "From a Farm Near Sian," here. It was written at a time of revolutionary fervor, the Cuban Missile Crisis had just happened, and mechanization was just starting to reach rural China.

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JOAN HINTON '39

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AS FOR LIFE HERE on the Sian farm, things are certainly on the move these days. In line with the directives of the tenth plenary session of the Chinese CP central committee, this whole huge country is going in for agriculture in an unprecedented way—our farm of course included. Hundreds of healthy, laughing, enthusiastic students have come from the city to join in our production. New Chinese-made tractors and farm machinery of all kinds are on the way. Bulldozers have been leveling the fields day and night preparing them for irrigation while our farm trucks have been put on special duty hauling bricks for new buildings to house our rapidly increasing population of both dairy cows and people. The new thing this year is the stress on technical improvement. The peasants throughout the country, having completed the job of organizing their collective economy, a job which culminated in the consolidation of the people's communes, are now turning to the job of mechanization, of finally and completely liberating themselves from the back-breaking toil that was old China. The whole of the country's industry is being geared to support them in this task. On

Joan Hinton, center, with husband Sid, left, in 1949.



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JOAN HINTON '39

our farm, people everywhere are thinking up all possible means of mechanizing, especially in those parts of the farm work which require heavy manual labor.

As for me, in line with all this, I am working again on that continuous flow automatic milk pasteurizer which I started in 1958. The main purpose of the machine is to lighten the burden of our dairy workers who now have to dump thousands of pounds of milk a day through our present pasteurizer by hand. We had to stop working on the machine in 1958 because it was so difficult to get parts, but now conditions are much, much better. I can just go to the city and buy all sorts of things I couldn't get before.

As I hunt around for parts, I get a chance to see quite a bit of the city too. It is really amazing how much food there is these days. Literally mountains of Chinese cabbage lie piled on the sidewalks, while meat is sold all over the city and the butcher shops are lined with neat fresh carcasses. There are fruit stands everywhere, selling not only local apples and pears, but oranges and tangerines too, sent up from the south.

... The people's minds and energies are occupied with the colossal creative problem of the modernization of China's agriculture, with the immediate task of preparing the conditions for an exceptionally good harvest next year. ■