

## Radio Interview

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### Radio Memories

Below is an interview with a man named Liu Qinghua who assembled a radio in 1969 shortly before being sent to the mountains of southern Sichuan to take part in building the remote steel town of Panzhihua. I have translated below my interview with him about how he made the radio and used it. In the course of our discussion, Liu Qinghua discussed the broader meanings that radios took on at the time, some of which contradicted the Communist Party's attempt to produce ideological regularity and valorize austerity.

**Meyskens:** When did you make this radio and why?

**Liu Qinghua:** It was 1969 in Beijing. The Cultural Revolution's mass movements were gradually becoming less, but schools were still not holding classes. Me and my classmates had nothing to do. Having nothing I had to do, I decided to assemble a radio. When there were things that I didn't understand about assembling it, then I would ask for advice from classmates in the Wireless Electronics Department. These were friends I had from high-school, who I pass the college entrance exam with to get into Beijing University. It was in this way that I developed my own ability to draft circuit diagrams, understand how electrical components work, and built up my own understanding of wireless electronics.

When I made the radio, I was about to graduate from university, and I didn't know where I would be assigned to work. It was possible that living conditions would be very harsh, so I decided to prepare for that. With a transistor radio you can listen to radio, it is a bit easier then to know about current events and learn new things.

I found the electrical parts from an old parts market at the southern gate of Beijing University on Haidian Street where I rummaged through a big pile of parts, found what I needed, and then haggled with the seller over the price, like at a flea market in the West. Most of the parts were new, so they were much more expensive. The outside has a plywood trim that I polished, sculpted, assembled, bonded, and painted.

**Meyskens:** Did many people make their own radios at the time?

**Liu Qinghua:** Many students at more well-known schools assembled their own transistor radio or crystal radio. The reception quality of a crystal radio was much worse. To make one it cost a dozen or so RMB, which was about how much a university student spent on living expenses per month at the time. My classmates would save their pocket money or even spend less on food. It took at least a year to scrape together enough money.

While in Beijing I also assembled a photograph developer contraption by taking two tin cans, soldering them together, and installing an incandescent light bulb inside along with a plano-convex lens in order to make the light uniform. I used hard black paper stacked up to adjust the distance [...] and I used a biconvex lens to enlarge the image. I put together all the parts on an iron stand in the chemistry lab. I used a rice bowl as the developer and to fix the plate, I used chopsticks as tweezers. On the dorm room door and window, I draped a blanket and wrapped red cloth around a light. That's how I made a dark room to develop photographs. The developing paper was also made of bits and pieces of different materials. About a kilo cost about seven cents and with it you could make about hundred photographs that were about six to seven inches long. In this rough place, I was at least able to develop and print over a thousand photos and record a few precious moments of when I was at university.

**Meyskens:** What radio stations could you listen to then?

**Liu Qinghua:** There was only the Central People's Radio [...] Panzhihua's industrial area relayed the signal from the Central People's Radio [...] There was no reception for Sichuan Radio or Yunnan Radio. Since Panzhihua was deep in the mountains, the kind of radio I had could not receive signals from other radio stations. Later, in the mid-70s, a transposer station was set up, and it was a bit easier to listen to the radio. But by then, everyone's living conditions had improved.

**Meyskens:** How common were radios?

**Liu Qinghua:** Panzhihua was a special area. Nearly everyone single school, enterprise, government organization, and any other big work-unit had a PA system. Everyday, the PA system would broadcast the Central People Radio's programs. Also at the appointed time, it would broadcast music in order to organize all workers and everyone else to physical fitness exercises. Listening to the radio for news and music was something that almost every single Chinese person could not without. People obtained information from the radio, understand national affairs, big international events, enjoyed music, radio shows, and other artistic programs. My own radio had another use too. I could listen alone to technical and scientific programs.

**Meyskens:** What other uses did people have for radios?

**Liu Qinghua:** When someone got married, the groom was expected to give the bride wedding gifts that were called "the three wheels and one speaker (san zhuan yi xiang)." This started around 1963 after China's three hard years were over when the economic situation gradually improved.

["The three wheels and one speaker] referred a bicycle, which cost about 150 RMB. Most people did not want a bicycle though because Panzhihua was in the mountains, so it could be exchanged for something else or it could be given as a gift and then exchanged for money. There was also a sewing machine which cost about 150 RMB and a wristwatch which cost about 120 RMB. Everybody wanted a Shanghai watch, a Fenghuang or Yongjiu brand bicycle, and a Butterfly brand sewing machine. Those are the three wheels. The speaker referred to a radio.

Everyone wanted a Red-Light (Hong deng pai) brand one, which cost about 120 RMB, and used a vacuum tube in it.

At the time, a vacuum tube transistor radio cost about a half-month's wages, about 20-30 RMB. About half of single men all had one. They were much better than a self-assembled radio. When people went outside to do their morning exercises, they often would listen to the radio while running. This was a common site on the road in the morning.

Based on average wages at the time, to be ready to purchase "the three wheels and one speaker," then you had to have about 600 RMB in total. For a university student, if they really economized and cut down on expenses, then it about four to five years to accumulate enough money. For factory workers, on the other hand, it took around ten years. If you take living standards in Sichuan at the time, holding a wedding with ten tables cost at least 200 RMB. You also had to add the cost of bedding, cloth, and clothing along with the pig and fish your family raised and the grain and vegetables your family cultivated [for the wedding dinner]. As you can see, preparing the "three wheels and one speaker" and holding a wedding were a really big burden for young working-class kids. The total cost for the wedding was around 800-1,000 RMB. If you were a village youth, then you always had to rely on your whole family's support. Poor families often had to take out loans or they had to negotiate with the family of the bride and find a way to make more flexible arrangements. There were some people who because of this could never afford a wife.

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