

CULTURAL REVOLUTION CONFERENCE MINES HISTORICAL TRUTH AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

BY YONGYI SONG

Chinese scholars battled historical amnesia at a ground-breaking conference on the Cultural Revolution earlier this year.

The famous Czech writer Milan Kundera once observed that the struggle between democracy and dictatorship is in a way a struggle between memory and amnesia. The Chinese government has long banned Cultural Revolution research in order to cover up historical truth and prolong its dictatorial rule, but in May this year more than 60 researchers and scholars dealt a blow to historical amnesia by gathering in New York City for an international conference marking the 40th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution.¹

Exploring the facts of the Cultural Revolution, its causes and its impact on the collective memory of the Chinese people, the conference was hailed in Chinese-language media as “the biggest and most successful international conference on the Cultural Revolution since the end of the Cultural Revolution.” The success of this conference was a tribute to the tenacity of Chinese people’s conscience and moral integrity against China’s totalitarian power.

Symbolic significance and rare depth of research

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) launched by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its leader Mao Zedong not only ruthlessly purged perceived political rivals, but also caused the deaths and persecution of millions of innocent people and the destruction of irreplaceable cultural relics and historical sites throughout China, and plunged the country into economic devastation. All this was done in the name of “class struggle,” “continuous revolution,” and “destroying the Four Olds.” One of the worst man-made catastrophes in Chinese history, it is comparable to the Holocaust launched by the Nazis against the Jews.

Owing to the fact that this decade-long catastrophe was perpetrated by the CCP and its “Great Leader” Mao Zedong, the CCP has banned independent Cultural Revolution research in China ever since the Cultural Revolution ended 30 years ago. This year, the Chinese government has not only strictly prohibited any commemorative and research activities about the Cultural Revolution, but it also spared no effort to prevent

commemorative activities held outside China. For instance, some 20 scholars from China were invited to participate in the New York symposium, but the Chinese government refused them permission to attend on the pretext of “preventing interference from hostile forces overseas.”

Prominent scholars who were denied their rights to participate in the conference included Professor Ding Dong of Shangxi Social Science Academy, Professor Xing Xiaoqun of Beijing Institute of Political Science for Youth, Professor Cui Weiping of Beijing Film College, Professor Tang Shaojie of Tsinghua University, Professor Yin Hongbiao of Beijing University, Tibetan writer Wei Se, and mainland China independent Cultural Revolution researcher Chen Guang. However, eight other mainland scholars managed to overcome various obstacles and find their way to the conference. They included Zhu Zheng, a noted historian on contemporary Chinese history, renowned reporter Gao Yu, independent Cultural Revolution researcher Xu Hailiang, and Yu Jie, Vice President of the Independent Chinese PEN Center. Those who were barred from attending the conference submitted written papers.

New developments in Cultural Revolution study

The success of this conference is reflected in the complexity of the issues it delved into and the emergence of Cultural Revolution study as an independent research subject. In particular, the



Conference participants (from L) Ho Pin, Wang Yi, Yu Jie, Hu Ping and Xu Ben. Photos courtesy of the author



Many local residents attended the conference.

conference was noted for its challenging but constructive and timely nature.

The challenging aspect was in the revelations of historical truth long covered up by the CCP, the refutations of official Cultural Revolution theories, and the questions raised about the legitimacy of CCP rule from a historical perspective. For instance, some well-known Cultural Revolution victims, such as Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and Ye Jiangying, who assisted Hua Guofeng in toppling the “Gang of Four,” have long been viewed as “pure victims and resisters” during the Cultural Revolution. However, some papers at the conference convincingly pointed out their additional roles as participants, supporters and perpetrators of the Cultural Revolution whose differences with Mao were purposely exaggerated by the government after the Cultural Revolution.

In his paper, Professor Ding Shu of Normandale College in Minnesota presented a detailed case for Ye Jiangying’s active participation in the persecution of Rou Ruiqing, the promotion of the personality cult of Mao and the establishment of the “capital work groups” that ruthlessly persecuted tens of thousands of innocent individuals and military cadres of different factions. For my part, I analyzed the ultra-left practices and theories of Liu Shaoqi in the early 1960s, as well as his persecution of tens of millions of ordinary people and cadres in the



Members of the audience actively participated in the discussions.

early stages of the Cultural Revolution, reaching the conclusion that Liu and other so-called “outstanding leaders of the CCP,” such as Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai and Peng Zhen, all made their distinctive contributions to the Cultural Revolution. In this sense, the Cultural Revolution must be considered to a considerable extent a “collective crime.”

Professor Warren Wanguo Sun of Monash University, Australia shared his views on the subject of internal strife among senior CCP officials during the Cultural Revolution. In his presentation, Professor Sun noted that Hua Guofeng was actually positioned to launch economic and political reforms during the last stage of the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping’s accusation that Hua was a follower of the “whatever Mao says goes” doctrine was more of a power struggle tactic than a theoretical difference. Professor Sun’s analysis revealed the hypocrisy and brutal power struggle within the CCP, and also helped explain why Deng Xiaoping’s promises regarding political reform served no purpose beyond power struggle.

Some scholars came up with conclusions about historical events that were drastically different from official CCP versions. For instance, Professor Xu Hailiang from China suggested through his research that the assault on Mao’s Wuhan residence by conservative rebel organizations and local military personnel was actually a “coup” caused by the mishandling of the situation by Mao and Zhou Enlai. After the so-called Wuhan Incident, Mao sacrificed three key members of the Cultural Revolution Small Group, namely, Wang Li, Guan Feng and Qi Benyu, in order to appease the military.

The constructive nature of the conference revealed itself in many new perspectives that raised analysis and study of the history of the Cultural Revolution and contemporary China to a new level. For instance, a dearth of research on the impact of the Cultural Revolution on China’s ethnic minority regions was addressed by scholars such as the Tibetan author Wei Se, who submitted a paper on the Cultural Revolution in Tibet, and one by Professor Chen Tijie examining the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia. Professor Chen gave credence to a semi-official estimate of 23,700 dead, 120,000 permanently injured and 500,000 incarcerated in Inner Mongolia. Given the total ethnic Mongolian population of two million at that time, this estimate indicates that some 30 percent were persecuted, a much higher ratio than that of China’s general population. Professor Zhou Minglang of Dickinson College further observed that the CCP’s wrong-headed ethnic minority policy devolved into chaos during the Cultural Revolution.

Another constructive contribution to scholarship was an effort to put the Cultural Revolution into the broader context of the worldwide leftist movement in the 1960s. Dr. Cheng Xiaonong, editor-in-chief of the U.S.-based journal *Contemporary China Research*, engendered heated debate and discussion by arguing that Mao’s launching of the Cultural Revolution was inspired by similar movements in the Soviet Union under Stalin. While many participants maintained that the scale of the two revolutions was different, Cheng’s proposition introduced a theoretical discussion on whether “Cultural Revolution” is an inevitable outcome of a Communist totalitarian system.

Professor Su Yang of the University of California at Irvine

and Stanford University professor Andrew Walder applied mathematical modeling to death statistics in county gazetteers to study and compare massacres in rural Hubei, Guangxi and Guangdong provinces during the Cultural Revolution. Convincingly demonstrating that the Cultural Revolution had significant repercussions beyond China's urban areas, their findings also gave compelling evidence of class struggle ideology and manipulation of various levels of local government as the main causes of violence perpetrated in rural China.

Finally, the conference was marked by its relevance to the political and economic landscapes of contemporary China. Deng Xiaoping launched economic reform when facing the shambles of China's economy at the end of the Cultural Revolution, and China's current leadership is composed almost entirely of members of the "Red Guard Generation," who were indelibly marked by the Cultural Revolution. However, up to now there has been little systematic research done in either China or the West about the political and cultural impact of the Cultural Revolution on today's Chinese society and on the governing policies of Hu Jintao and his colleagues.

Professor Wei Chuxiong, Chair of the History Department of Susquehanna University in central Pennsylvania, attempted to fill this void in a presentation concluding that the power struggle immediately following the Cultural Revolution accelerated the rise of the third and fourth generation of the CCP leadership. The despicable behavior of the *Taizidang* (the children of Party elders) during and after the Cultural Revolution facilitated the rise of party officials such as Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao who did not have prominent Party backgrounds. Wei concluded that the fact that Hu was a member of the 4.14 Faction, a conservative-rebel organization at Tsinghua University, clearly indicated that his ideological preferences were already established by the time the Cultural Revolution broke out. In other words, Hu is a typical technocrat along the Liu-Deng lines, and reform on his watch will probably amount to no more than an attempted throwback to CCP rule from 1949 to 1966.

Reconstruction of collective memory

Obstruction and misrepresentation by the Chinese government has long covered up important historical facts, to the detriment of the Chinese public's collective memory of this catastrophe. Thirty years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, "Mao Zedong Fervor" continues with no signs of abatement. Many young people have no personal recollection of the Cultural Revolution, and some don't even remember which year it broke out. This historical amnesia prevents the Chinese people from learning the important lessons of the Cultural Revolution, and impedes efforts to promote political reform in China.

Hu Ping, editor-in-chief of the U.S.-based magazine *Beijing Spring*, posited that "Mao Fervor" only appears to be a spontaneous phenomenon among the general public, but has actually been induced by the government. Professor Xu Ben of Saint Mary's College in California likewise pointed out that historical memorabilia reflect and record history, but the true significance of the Cultural Revolution is reflected in the suffering, brutality, fear and oppression beneath the glossy nostalgic images.

During the conference, Professor Xu Youyu of the Chinese



Speakers and attendees continued discussions over lunch.

Academy of Social Sciences faxed over a brief report about an "underground" forum about the Cultural Revolution that had just been held in China without the authorization of the government. The most heated debate during that conference centered on the relationship between oral history and Cultural Revolution study. Participants at the New York conference all agreed on the critical importance of preserving historical archive materials, as many eyewitnesses of the Cultural Revolution are passing away.

Mainland scholar Xing Xiaoqun observed in her submitted paper, "Due to government interference and obstructions through administrative means, archival materials related to the Cultural Revolution are not available to the public, publications related to the Cultural Revolution are restricted, and academic research on the Cultural Revolution has been very difficult. Out of their commitment to the preservation of history, grassroots independent scholars still work hard to salvage and preserve history. Under the current circumstances, oral history has become a viable approach to conducting Cultural Revolution research."

Mainland China scholar Zhu Jiangguo argued that the opening of a few official Cultural Revolution museums would no more prevent a repeat of the Cultural Revolution than government anti-corruption campaigns have stopped corruption. He encouraged the opening of grassroots-based Cultural Revolution museums to promote independent reflection and soul-searching on the Cultural Revolution and its ramifications.

The three-day conference included many other important topics and debates that are certain to attract further research and contribute to the reaping of historical lessons and more effective political reform in mainland China. The contributed essays, including some translated into English, will be compiled into a conference volume and published in Hong Kong as part of the *Twenty-First Century China Book Series* later this year.

NOTE

1. The conference was co-hosted by the Foundation for China in the 21st Century, City University of New York, and the Queens Borough Public Library. Funding for the conference came from the National Endowment for Democracy, City University of New York, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, and Queens Library.