

THE PAST IS NOT ANOTHER COUNTRY

AN INTERVIEW WITH WANG YOUQIN

In October of 2000, Wang Youqin launched a Web site recognizing those who died from persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Through twenty years of research involving more than a thousand interviews, Wang has compiled a list of one thousand victims and information regarding their deaths. The Web site, www.chinese-memorial.org, bears the slogan, “We will never forget you.” A little more than a year after the Web site was launched, Chinese authorities blocked access from the mainland.

CRF: Why is it important to confront the Cultural Revolution rather than just to treat it as a matter of history?

Wang Youqin (Wang): The Cultural Revolution ended only 29 years ago. Almost half of the population of China today experienced the ten years of the Cultural Revolution or grew up during that time.

As far as the development of China’s economy in recent years is concerned, it is clear that the Chinese authorities have changed Mao’s policies to a great extent. First, they discontinued the cultural revolutionary practice of long-term, large-scale and systematic persecution. Second, they started adopting new economic policies that gradually released Chinese people from the trap of poverty of Mao’s time. In this context, the Cultural Revolution is not merely the past but is closely related to the present.

CRF: In the case of many atrocities in other parts of the world, the persecutors manage to dehumanize their victims through ethnic or cultural differences, e.g. whites against blacks in South Africa, Aryans against Jews in Germany. In China, the situation seems more analogous to that in Russia, where the real crux of the matter was social and political divisions. Do you think the often blurred boundaries between persecutor and victim may impede might be one of the reasons that so little

has been done to systematically address the crimes against humanity that occurred during the Cultural Revolution?

Wang: In China, the persecutions were planned and arranged in advance. The leaders of the persecutions issued directives regarding what kinds of people would be targeted and how to attack them in detail, step by step. They defined categories of “enemies” and created new phrases in the Chinese language to label them. In my book *Victims of the Cultural Revolution*, I describe the backgrounds of 659 victims who died not for particular things they did, but simply because they belonged to a category of “enemies.”

Teachers were a major target of the Cultural Revolution, as Mao clearly explained to the American journalist Edgar Snow. The result of this decision was obvious and serious. At the Girls’ Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University, one vice-principal was beaten to death by Red Guard students, and four teachers committed suicide after being attacked. At Beijing Kuanjie Elementary School, the principal and dean were killed by their students. At Peking University, 63 people died from persecution. It is painful to list the number of deaths in more than 200 schools that I was able to include in my investigations. I also regret that Mr. Snow did not mention the death of any teachers in his writings.

In my opinion, the boundary between the persecutors and victims was clear up to a certain point. But it often happened that some people who had previously been persecutors became victims as the Cultural Revolution targeted more and more “enemies.” For example, Jiang Longji and Lu Ping, two top cadres at Peking University, labeled more than 700 professors and students as “Rightists,” a category of “enemy,” in 1957 and 1958. Many of the “Rightists” of Peking University were sent to jail or labor camps, and six of them were sentenced to death and executed. In 1966, both Jiang and Lu were attacked as heads of universities (by then Jian headed Lanzhou University and Lu headed Peking University) and accused of being “counterrevolutionary revisionists.” Both of them were brutally tortured, and Jiang committed suicide. (In my book I described how 20 people who were heads of universities like Jiang died during the Cultural Revolution.)

If we put place two photographic negatives together, one on top of another, we will see a blurred picture. After the Cul-

tural Revolution, some people wanted to emphasize that they were persecuted and denied that they had persecuted others earlier. Their double standard has caused moral and historical confusion.

CRF: You have read Solzhenitsyn extensively and are very familiar with persecutions in the Soviet Union during the Communist era. Do you feel Russia has been able to confront its violent past more effectively than China? What factors do you think make the two places similar or different in this respect?

Wang: It is true that Chinese have produced much less writing on their violent past than Russians. There are many reasons for this. I will just raise one of them here: the persecution in China

was more serious than in Russian in some aspects. In Russia, Stalin had “show trials” for the enemies he purged, but in China, Mao even did not even bother with trials. In my book and in a paper entitled “Student Attacks against Teachers: The Revolution of 1966,” you can see that in middle schools and even elementary schools, many teachers and principals were beaten to death by their Red Guard students, in their own schools and without any verdict.

The nature of this greater terror caused even deep fear and psychological scars. Many survivors still live in fear and don’t want to describe what they suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Some have even suffered a kind of amnesia regarding their terror during that time.

There was a song entitled “Song of Ox-Ghosts and Snake-



China didn't even bother with show trials. Photo courtesy of Li Zhensheng from *Red-Color News Soldier*.

Demons” that was composed by high school students who were Red Guards. They forced educators to sing it with a macabre melody while condemning them as “Ox-Ghosts and Snake-Demons.” This song spread from Beijing throughout the whole country. The lyrics went as follows:

I am an ox-ghost and snake-demon.
I am an ox-ghost and snake-demon.
I am guilty. I am guilty.
I committed crimes against the people,
So the people take me as the object of the dictatorship.
I have to lower my head and admit my guilt.
I must be obedient.
I am not allowed to speak or act incorrectly.
If I speak or act incorrectly,
May you beat me and smash me,
Beat me and smash me.

It is interesting that none of the teachers I interviewed could recall all ten lines of these lyrics, in spite of the fact that many teachers were forced to sing it several times a day throughout 1966. It was a former student, also a Red Guard, who sent me the entire song when I put out a request over the Internet. For the teachers, psychological trauma destroyed their memory of such details. This can be considered a typical example of the selective memory of victims.

However, feelings of terror should not become an excuse for forgetting the past. China has a long tradition of written history, and Chinese scholars should make more effort to record recent history.

CRF: In your article “Repentance for the Death of Li Jie,” you refer to the guilt of someone who felt she had failed to intervene on behalf of someone else who was later persecuted to death. Do you think this kind of “survivor guilt” is also an impediment, along with the large number of surviving individuals who actually took part in the persecutions?

Wang: In my paper entitled “63 Victims and the Cultural Revolution at Beijing University,” I pointed out that only one person among the 63 victims at that university died in prison; the other 62 were simply killed or committed suicide after being tortured on Peking University’s campus or nearby. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong specifically ordered the implementation of what he called “mass dictatorship,” which meant letting ordinary people carry out most of the persecution rather than the prisons and police force.

After the Revolution started, targeted persons were referred to as *niuguisheshen* (“ox ghosts and snake demons”), and eventually every work unit established jails that came to be known as *niupeng* (“ox shacks”). In one of “ox shacks” of Peking University, more than 200 people were locked up for 10 months.

One result of the “mass dictatorship” was that a great many people participated in the persecution to a greater or lesser degree for a variety of reasons. But if they are not willing to express their regrets now, it will be hard for them to face up to the facts in the past.



Cattle or chickens? Photo courtesy of Li Zhensheng from *Red-Color News Soldier*.

The Cultural Revolution destroyed not only so many people’s lives, but also the moral standards of society generally. In this context, I was deeply touched when I interviewed Guan Qiulan and I wrote her into the story of Li Jie, a victim.

I have received many letters from readers since I started the Internet memorial. Many of them particularly refer to the story of cattle and chicken that I included in the introduction to the memorial. It is a true story. I interviewed a teacher who spent many years in a so-called “labor-reform” camp during the Cultural Revolution. His job was to tend cattle and chickens. One day they killed a cow that had become too old to work. They killed the cow near a willow tree, where green grass always grew abundantly. After the killing, when the teacher tried to drive cattle to the willow tree to feed, they resisted and moaned, bellowing as if in protest. But he found that chickens were different. When you slaughtered a chicken and threw its intestines on the ground, all the other chicken would rush over and fight over those intestines.

I raised a question in my introduction: Which attitude should people adopt—that of the cattle or of the chickens? A reader in China emailed me a message with the subject line: “I don’t want to be a chicken any more.” From this kind of response, I feel the survival of a strong sense of morality such as I saw in Guan Qiulan.

CRF: A French journalist recently published a book, *Machete Season*, in which he interviews some perpetrators of the Rwanda genocide about what they did and why they took part in the slaughter. Do you see any value in someone undertake a similar project regarding the persecutors of the Cultural Revolution?

Wang: I have not seen any projects regarding persecutors in the Cultural Revolution. If we want to understand how the Cultural Revolution occurred and prevent it from happening again, we need to understand how the persecutors were produced and how they gained the power to do what they did.

Because of the lack of knowledge of victims in public memory, many of China’s persecutors are not forced to admit or apologize for what they did. Some of these persecutors have even threatened those who want to tell the truth.

CRF: At present, it seems the most effective ways of dealing with the Cultural Revolution are projects such as yours that seek to expose the truth. Do you have any opinions on what other methods adopted overseas might be suitable for China?

Wang: I would like to see some organizations involved in working on the Cultural Revolution. Last year a Russian human rights group published two CDs with the names of 1,345,796 victims. More than 25,000 Cambodian victims of the Khmer Rouge have been documented. In contrast, I have only 1,000 names on my Web memorial, even though I have been worked very hard to collect the names of Chinese victims over the last twenty years.

An individual's efforts are limited, and what I have uncovered is just a very small portion of the brutality that occurred. Some people take the cynical view that Chinese victims' lives are cheaper than those of other nations because of the large Chinese population.

Lacking organizational support, we have to rely on individual volunteers. Five years ago, a person who helped me with the Web memorial called himself a *yi gong* in Chinese, which means a "volunteer worker for justice." Many people have helped with my project, and I consider myself to be one of the *yi gongs*.

CRF: Ideally, what results would you like to see from confronting the Cultural Revolution and its lingering effect on Chinese society? Should there be monetary compensation in some cases? Should there be punishment of perpetrators? Or is even setting the record straight more than we can hope for?

Wang: Confronting the Cultural Revolution has a lot to do with today's social system and moral standards in China. Monetary compensation should be paid to the victims, even if it's just a symbolic amount. But I don't see the possibility of that happening in the near future. In fact, victims' families never mention compensation to me. Many of them simply send me information about their loved ones to put on the Internet, and they expect no more than that.

CRF: Why do you think the Chinese authorities block your Web site, when the government has officially acknowledged that mistakes were made during the Cultural Revolution?

Wang: During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese media never mentioned a word about the victims. Newspapers and films of that period show Red Guards march through Tiananmen Square, waving red flags and Mao's little red book, yelling the slogan, "May Chairman Mao live for ten thousand years." The victims were considered enemies, pieces of trash that were beneath mention.

The families of most victims were not even allowed to keep their loved one's ashes after cremation. I have tried to find a corner in cyberspace for the victims, but even that is not allowed.

After 16 months on the Internet, Beijing authorities blocked my Web memorial for victims of the Cultural Revolution. In his book *1984*, George Orwell wrote this slogan of the Party: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." The book that Orwell wrote 50 years ago realistically describes what happened to my Web memorial in the year 2002. It was not a surprise, but I still felt very sad.

CRF: Can we hope that the Cultural Revolution experience was so exceptionally horrendous that it will never happen again? Or is there still some possibility that a strong leader could again manipulate the Chinese people into another such period of madness?

Wang: "Never Again" is a great slogan, and we need to realize it through education of the younger generation. I am glad to see my work play a small role in this respect. I have put my email address on the Web memorial and in my book so readers can send me their feedback. I have received letters not only from people who experienced the Revolution, but also from young students. Months ago I received a letter that went like this:

Hello! My name is Katie, and I am 16 years old. I am doing a presentation on Mao Zedong for English class. I was looking for the effects of the Cultural Revolution on the people of China, and I found your article, it brought tears to my eyes.

Several days later, I received another letter from her:

Actually, I am simulating a Chinese classroom during the Cultural Revolution, and I am the teacher. I have made 31 red wristbands, and a scarf for myself; I even have two people from my class who have agreed to be a red guard and a student who unfortunately must be informed of her parents being taken to a struggle meeting. My "students" are going to recite Mao's quotes, and I have a Chinese friend teaching me how to actually say one of his poster slogans. The class is going to learn the strictness of such an atmosphere, and hopefully will understand the scary power [Mao] had over China.

Katie's letters shows that the lessons from the Cultural Revolution can reach beyond nations and eras. Her ideas brought me great encouragement, and I will continue my project on the Cultural Revolution for the sake of our younger generation and the bright future we deserve.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Wang Youqin has also published a book, *Victims of the Cultural Revolution: An Investigative Account of Persecution, Imprisonment and Murder* (Wenge Shounanzhe) (Hong Kong: Open Magazine Publishing, 2004). She plans to publish a second volume.