

## **What She Saw at the Revolution Youqin Wang's struggle to memorialize the victims of the Cultural Revolution. By Jay Nordlinger**

Youqin Wang is a remarkable woman, engaged in a remarkable life's project. She is a lecturer in Chinese at the University of Chicago, but her true work goes far beyond. She has set herself the task of uncovering and documenting the depravity and crimes of the Cultural Revolution, that outbreak of evil in China that lasted from 1966 to 1977.

To this end, Dr. Wang has interviewed close to a thousand people: survivors, victims, relatives of the murdered, those with memories who can bear to speak. She has also determined to gather every scrap of paper related to the Cultural Revolution, for the Communist authorities have tried to suppress or destroy every vestige of it. In this, they have been alarmingly successful. But Dr. Wang is surrounded, in her Chicago apartment, with boxes that contain newspaper clippings, Red Guard fliers and posters, notebooks, "self-criticisms," and photos. She is resolved that the truth of this period will not be lost.

Dr. Wang first felt her "calling"—no other word seems as appropriate—years ago, when she was a teenager. Even as the Cultural Revolution was in progress, she read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a book that inspired her to record what was happening around her. It was impermissible to speak of the daily horrors; so she confided what she saw and heard to a diary, addressing it as "Kitty," as Anne had. But unlike Anne, she destroyed her pages shortly after she had written them. You could be killed for what you said in your diary; many were.

While a student at Beijing University, Youqin Wang found Solzhenitsyn, a discovery that set the course of her life. She read *Cancer Ward*, a book that seemed to be speaking directly to her, telling the story of her own country. Even the smallest details seemed right. She was so excited that she could not sleep. Then she managed to get a hold of *The Gulag Archipelago*, of which there were very few copies in China. Hers came from a contact in the English department. When she read it, she realized she was bound to do something similar.

"I had the idea that I shouldn't waste my life," she says. "I had to make it useful."

Dr. Wang has read every word of Solzhenitsyn, up to the latest essays. Chinese dissidents and others have long complained that China has had no Solzhenitsyn—and no Robert Conquest, really—and that this has made a terrible difference. The West has little understanding, and the Chinese have no chronicler, or defender. The government, of course, has repudiated the Cultural Revolution, but it permits no study of it, no teaching of it, no remembrance of it. Indeed, it has arrested and imprisoned those who have dared to investigate.

Over the years, the authorities have published the names of about 70 victims of the Cultural Revolution: high-ranking cadres or other prominent figures. It has therefore acknowledged dozens, not the thousands or millions. This is what has spurred Dr. Wang. She burns to memorialize ordinary people.

She knows she may not be able to do the work of Solzhenitsyn, but figures she can do a slice. Chinese scholars must band together, she says, to approximate the work of Solzhenitsyn on the history of modern Russia. Dr. Wang came to the United States in 1988, and had been returning to China each summer to carry on her researches. Lately, however, it has been too dangerous, with the government rounding on scholars such as herself. Thus far, she has concentrated on one horrible aspect of the Cultural Revolution: the attacks of students on their teachers. Her findings—meticulous, unrelenting—are collected on her website, [www.chinese-memorial.org](http://www.chinese-memorial.org). It bears the message, "We Will Never Forget You."

The anti-teachers campaign started in the "Red August" of 1966, when Mao gave the go-ahead to treat teachers as "class enemies." At first, the students' abuse was merely verbal: They began to address their teachers disrespectfully, and to denounce them in "big-letter posters." This was shocking and unnatural in China, where reverence for teachers had been the norm. With frightening speed—a matter of weeks—the abuse turned physical. Students began to torture and murder their teachers in a mad frenzy. It was as though someone had thrown a switch, unleashing all that savagery. In a sense, someone had: Mao Zedong.

To read Dr. Wang's documentation is to descend into hell. The sheer invention of torture boggles the imagination: nail-spiked clubs, boiling water, hot cinders, drownings in fountains, the forced swallowing of chemicals, and nails, and excrement, and the beating,

always the beatings—the students even beat the corpses, not wanting to stop. They painted slogans in their victims' blood. And all the while they were cheered on by their government, which held them up as revolutionary examples.

Red Guard students—"little suns," Mao's wife called them—were sent from Beijing into the countryside, to instruct their fellow students in the brutalization of their teachers. Initially, the Red Guards themselves had to do the beating and killing, but once the psychological barrier was broken, the local students were happy to commit the deeds themselves. The atmosphere was gleeful, giddy. Any teacher or administrator was liable to be "struggled against" (the party euphemism for this violence). Children of teachers were made to join in attacks on their own parents. More than a few went insane as a result. Eventually, individual students—particularly those from the "wrong" families—were turned on as well.

Before the campaign was over, thousands of teachers and others, in Beijing alone, were murdered. Many committed suicide, unable to bear either further torture or the humiliation. For the most part, none of them breathed a word. Some tried to defend themselves, to save their lives, but to no avail—the students killed not only their principal targets, but their families, too. The teachers could do nothing. As Dr. Wang says, the majority were not cowards; they simply had no recourse.

Many of the survivors of the period have been willing to talk to Dr. Wang, obviously, but many others have not. The trauma lasts, and the fear can be choking. So strong is the party's hold on the minds of its subjects that some say, "I will not speak of it—I don't want to damage China's reputation." Even in America, some Chinese are afraid to speak over the phone, believing that someone will be listening, that there will be a price to pay. Dr. Wang bought an expensive video camera, hoping to tape some of the testimonies. Of the hundreds, only three consented; fear governed the rest.

The work of this memorialization takes a toll on the memorializer herself, needless to say. Dr. Wang spends every spare minute in the company of evil: drawing it out of people, thinking about it, writing it down. This often leaves her depressed, and like Solzhenitsyn, she says, "I would rather not—but I must." Many of her countrymen encourage her, aware that she is rendering a service to them all. Dr. Wang says it gives her a thrill simply to list the names of victims on her website. These names were intended for oblivion; but she has rescued them.

For now, Dr. Wang is interested only in fact-gathering, not theorizing. "The facts have to be established," she says, "and any conclusions must come later." Much of the theorizing that does go on about the Cultural Revolution disgusts her. Many scholars dismiss crimes such as the anti-teachers campaign as the work of a few "idealists and radicals." Some say, "It's just like parents who beat their children. The party is our parents, and sometimes our parents beat us children without reason, but still, they are our parents, and we must not oppose them."

Sooner or later, says Youqin Wang, the Chinese people will have to take possession of their history and their consciousness, deciding that they do not have to be ruled by lies and fear and a false obedience. In the meantime, she will continue her labors, learning such truth as she can, and telling it, in the hope that this truth may, in some way, prove freeing.

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