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NOTES FROM ACADEME

Documenting a Nation's Madness, One Tale at a Time

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Chicago

One August afternoon in 1966, Youqin Wang watched in shock as her 10th-grade classmates began torturing five of their school administrators. On the playground of the elite Girls Middle School, attached to Beijing Teachers University, she saw these students, who had declared themselves among Mao Zedong's Red Guards, splash black ink on the adults and hang large wooden boards scrawled with "counterrevolutionary" around their necks.

Ms. Wang, who was 13 at the time, slipped out of the crowd as soon as she could and returned to her dormitory. In the dining room that night, she overheard some Red Guards giggling about how they had poured boiling water over their victims. They had also beaten the teachers with nail-spiked clubs and forced them to eat dirt. That evening, the first vice principal, a 50-year-old woman who had worked at the school for 17 years, died after losing consciousness three hours into the torment. Zhongyun Bian became the first educator beaten to death by students in Beijing as Mao's Cultural Revolution sprang to life that summer.

If it were not for Ms. Wang, now a senior lecturer of Chinese here at the University of Chicago, Ms. Bian's death would probably have been forgotten, swept up in the larger story of the destruction of the country's economy and social stability during the next 11 years. But Ms. Wang is determined not to let the world forget.

Over the past 22 years, she has painstakingly gathered the names and stories of more than 700 educators who were killed or committed suicide as a result of torture during the Cultural Revolution. She has posted the information on her Web site, Chinese Holocaust Memorial (<http://www.chinese-memorial.org/>), along with two papers documenting the evolution and scope of the violence.

"We have a problem in our culture" in China, says Ms. Wang, a small, intense woman who lives alone in a condominium on the edge of the Chicago campus. "We never remember our history."

The Cultural Revolution has long since been repudiated, but the Chinese government still will not release many details of the atrocities committed in Mao's name, viewing them as a black mark on China's history. The survivors and their tormentors just want to forget. Given that many were forced to work and live alongside each other after the terror had subsided, says Ms. Wang, people have learned to repress their memories.

She has not forgotten, however, and Roderick MacFarquhar, chairman of the department of government at Harvard University and an expert in modern Chinese history, is glad she hasn't. He calls Ms. Wang's project a unique and important contribution to the understanding of that period. Most works on the subject, he says, have dealt with "high-level history," and not the effects on ordinary citizens.

Ms. Wang chooses to focus on personal details because she believes that to understand the Cultural Revolution, one must first know precisely what happened. "In Chinese, we say that we cannot build a pagoda on sand. We need a foundation. For me, I think, the foundation is the facts."

She began her quest motivated by anger and disgust, and the memory of Ms. Bian's death. After three years of high school -- little more than daily "struggle sessions" in which both teachers and students were verbally and physically abused -- Ms. Wang and her younger sister were shipped to the countryside to work as farmers. Back home, their father, an engineering professor at an industrial college, languished in jail, his only crime a critical remark about the Cultural Revolution.

Until she left Beijing, Ms. Wang wondered whether she had simply misunderstood what was going on around her -- whether, in fact, violence did have a place, as in the Victor Hugo novels about the French Revolution that she secretly read. But when she saw the poverty of the countryside -- farmers whose faces were swollen from lack of food -- she knew that the poor were suffering as much as the so-called "capitalist intellectuals."

Ten years later, when she was finally allowed to return to Beijing and enroll in college, she was shocked to discover that her professors at Peking University said nothing about the poverty or the violence. Instead, she says, they used Marxist theory to devise dry critiques of Mao and his failed revolution. "I knew I could not speak out, but I could write, I could record," she says. "That's my resistance, the only resistance I could do."

Ms. Wang roamed the halls of Peking University, asking professors which

of their colleagues had died during the Cultural Revolution. She compiled a list of 23 names but believes there are many she never learned about. "Even now," she says, "they don't know how many people died there."

She continued her work after coming to the United States in 1988 to teach Chinese at Stanford University. Gathering those first 700 names required enormous persistence, using the most basic of research techniques: calling, writing, and e-mailing people who had either attended or taught at schools and colleges in China during the Cultural Revolution to find out what had happened when they were there. Starting with friends and classmates, she estimates, she has contacted more than 1,000 people.

The hardest part, she says, is persuading people to talk. She spent three years tracking down one man in China whose parents were killed, only to have him nervously reply that he didn't want any trouble because his wife was sick and they had a young child. That may happen more often now that the Chinese government has blocked access to her Web site there.

The profiles of the victims that Ms. Wang has compiled are brief but powerful. The principal of a middle school had boiling water poured on him and thumbtacks stuck in his forehead. A teacher at an elementary school was forced to swallow nails and balls of excrement. Others were whipped with copper-buckled leather belts or forced to bend over at a right angle and stand in that position for hours. The tortures went on for days, or weeks.

"Sometimes I get really tired. I don't want to touch this stuff anymore," she says. "But I have to be tough." She is sitting in her living room, with its plastic, inflatable furniture and a television resting on bound volumes of *People's Daily*, the newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. She is unable to say how much time she spends on her project, because the only time she does not spend on it is when she is teaching at the university. "You see me," she says with a smile. "I have no life." It is one of the few downbeat comments she makes in an otherwise unflagging five-hour conversation. Mostly, she is absorbed by her research, telling stories about the victims she has come across, or explaining Mao's political strategies. She laughs frequently, although more in incredulity than anything else.

In her sparsely furnished home, one room is filled with the results of her research: handwritten interview notes, death notices, posters printed by Red Guard students denouncing their teachers. A computer sits in the middle of the room. She receives e-mails daily from people who have heard about her project. My mother was killed, they say. Or, my father committed suicide when I was 3. Someday, she says, she would like to publish her research in a book, preferably in Chinese.

From one of the boxes, Ms. Wang pulls a flier written by young Red Guards announcing that they have changed the name of their elementary school to The Long March, in honor of Mao's early journey across China. Another file holds a letter with a Red Guard seal that had been sent to one of her interview subjects. It is perfunctory: Your father died, you can pick up his body at such and such a place. The man, she remembers, was too afraid to go.

For many families, Ms. Wang's work is the closest to justice they will ever get. In 1993, she met the husband of her former vice principal, Ms. Bian. By then in his 80s, Jingyao Wang showed her a file of documents spanning 23 years of his attempts to seek some accounting for his wife's death. In the file was a letter Ms. Bian had written to the authorities five weeks before she was killed, telling of a "struggle session" at the school that lasted four hours. "I was beaten and kicked," she wrote. "My hands were tied behind my back. They hit me with a wooden rifle that was used for militia training. My mouth was filled with dirt. They spat in my face." She asked for help but received no reply.

After Ms. Bian's death, her husband was visited by local authorities, who told him to have a "correct attitude toward the revolutionary masses." He was so angry that he bought a camera and took pictures of his wife's battered body. In 1979, two years after the Cultural Revolution ended, Mr. Wang sought justice through the courts. In 1989, the Supreme People's Court sent him the final word: His case was not valid, because the statute of limitations had run out.