

REPENTANCE FOR THE DEATH OF LI JIE

BY WANG YOUQIN

The crimes of the Cultural Revolution have taken their toll not only on the victims, but also on those who feel compelled to record the human tragedies of the time, and those who feel they did not do enough to prevent those tragedies.

I want to express my deep gratitude to Teacher Guan Qiulan for her repentance and the encouragement it has given me.

I knew from the outset that studying the history of the Cultural Revolution would require strenuous effort. However, I never expected this study to cause such psychological pain. "Pain" may not be the proper word to describe my feelings, because it is not a clear or obvious kind of "ache" or "bitterness," but still makes me feel depressed and melancholy while I am writing and for some time afterwards.

The way I carry out my research is to collect written and photographic records from that period, in addition to interviewing individuals who lived through the Cultural Revolution. I have persisted in my research because I feel there are many facts about the Cultural Revolution, especially the hardships suffered by ordinary people, that have not been recorded or reported. I am grateful to the many interviewees who have spent their precious time helping me with their recollections and eyewitness accounts of the Cultural Revolution. They tell me about their experiences, and then I organize my notes from the interviews, recording each individual's experience and the details of each event.

For instance, with regard to the Peking University Attached Middle School, which was one of the birthplaces of the Red Guard movement and the school where Guan Qiulan taught for 40 years, I learned of the following previously unreported stories:

1) In the summer of 1966, Liu Meide, an assistant principal and teacher of chemistry, was labeled an "element of the evil anti-communist and anti-socialist clique." Her head was shaved and she was beaten with a thick pole until it broke. At that time Liu Meide was noticeably pregnant. One day, when a reporter from *Beijing Daily* came to carry out interviews and take photographs, the Red Guards forced Liu Meide to kneel on a

table while one of them stood behind her with his foot pressing against her back, so the reporter could take a picture of "striking down the class enemy and putting the boot in." After the pictures were taken, the Red Guard kicked Liu Meide off the table to the ground.

2) In 1966, the Peking University Attached Middle School gave birth to the famous couplet, "Hero father, manly son; reactionary father, blackguard son." Wan Hong, a freshman student, was regarded as a "blackguard" because her father was labeled a "Rightist" in 1957. One day, when some male Red Guards in her class were trying to beat her, she ran into the girls' restroom to hide, and there encountered Peng Xiaomeng, one of the Red Guard leaders. Wan Hong pleaded to Peng Xiaomeng, "You were received by Chairman Mao, you knew the policy. Please tell them to not beat me." Peng Xiaomeng simply dragged Wan Hong out of the restroom. Wan Hong was ordered to stand on a stool while classmates beat her with copper-buckled belts. Another classmate pulled the stool from under her feet so that she tumbled to the cement floor.

3) On August 27, 1966, during the high tide of the "Destroy the Four Olds" campaign,¹ Red Guards from the Peking University Attached Middle School ransacked the home of workers Chen Yanrong and Liu Wancai, who lived close to the school. The students then abducted the couple and brought them to the school for a beating. Chen Yanrong, aged 37, died of his injuries that night, while his wife was left covered with bruises. An elderly woman was also beaten to death that night. Chen's body was taken out and burned. His ashes were not recovered, but his family was billed 28 yuan as a "cremation fee," which they had to borrow to pay. One can imagine the hardship subsequently experienced by Chen's six under-aged children. After the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party's Peking University Attached Middle School branch paid Chen's family 2,500 yuan in compensation. Receiving the money, Chen's wife wept, "I have never seen so much money in my whole life. But what good is the money to me? I want my husband."

In the 30 years since, not one of the persecutors has ever expressed an apology to the above three victims or their families.

By hand and through the computer keyboard, I record these stories from the Cultural Revolution. These are powerful

historical documents, but they are deeply painful, even for someone who is merely recording them. While recording these stories, I often became very depressed.

I remember when I was visiting one of Wan Hong's classmates, and she was telling me of how Wan Hong was abused, her 15-year-old daughter, sitting nearby, broke down in tears. I cannot cry, but I often spend long periods inconsolable over the darkness of humanity that I see.

A friend of mine who has consistently supported my research into the Cultural Revolution once voiced concern for me. She said, "Aiya, how can you write these stories? It will kill you."

I am very grateful for her caring and kindness. However, having started, I wish to continue, even as my heart is rubbed raw by these stories. Fortunately this research, which seems simple, actually requires a great deal of time and energy and occupies my mind. In addition, at difficult moments I remind myself of stories that are related but of a different nature. One of these is the repentance of a teacher named Guan Qiulan.

In the summer of 1997, while I was in Beijing, someone told me that Guan Qiulan, a teacher of Peking University Attached Middle School, had read an article of mine, "1966: A Revolution of Students Beating Teachers," and wanted to talk with me. Of course I was more than willing to meet her. I had heard of her while I was a student at Peking University in the early 1980s. She was well known as an exemplary teacher, and was said to be much loved and respected by her students. By the time I met her, she had retired from the Attached Middle School and was working as the principal of a private vocational school. Although she was no longer young, she was clearly still vigorous; she moved with agility, and her speech was frank and to the point.

The weather was sultry on the day we met, and I was moved that an elderly person was willing to brave the heat to keep an appointment with me. Teacher Guan had grown up in Indonesia, but she came to Beijing in 1949 to pursue her secondary education, and went on to study history at Peking University. Her father had been a teacher in Indonesia, and Teacher Guan wished likewise to devote her life to what she considered "the most sacred vocation under the sun."

Having come from overseas, she was placed in the "controlled use" category before the Cultural Revolution. After the Cultural Revolution began, she was sent to the "laogai squads"² of the Peking University Attached Middle School, which were also known as the "forces of evil squads."³ In August 1966, the Attached Middle School had three *laogai* squads, which were differentiated according to the degree of their "crimes." Teacher Guan was in "Laogai Squad No. 2," which included 12 teachers and staff members. The other two squads also included more than ten people each.

Teacher Guan told me that Laogai Squad No. 2 included a female staff member named Li Jie. I had heard this name previously, and knew that she had been beaten to death during the Cultural Revolution, but I did not know the details. Teacher Guan said Li Jie told her that she had come to Beijing to escape an arranged marriage when she was young. That was while Beijing was occupied by the Japanese army. Li took up with a

Japanese man and had a child. Eventually the man left her and the child died. During the campaign against "counterrevolutionaries" in early 1950s, Li Jie "confessed" this part of her history and the authorities "closed the case." She went to work as a librarian at the Peking University Attached Middle School after that.

When the Cultural Revolution began, Li Jie's past was dredged up again, and she was severely beaten in the summer of 1966. Red Guard students ordered her to kneel inside a drawer so that she could not move, then they beat her with iron rods that were used for cleaning stoves. The Red Guards searched Li Jie's home and found a document for her family's gravesite, which they insisted was a "land deed" that she was holding in wait for "a restoration of reactionary rule." They beat her nearly to death. Two years later, during the movement to "purify the class ranks," the students beat Li Jie again. Recognizing the severity of her condition, the school authorities sent her to Haidian Hospital, where she died. The medical certificate stated her cause of death as a ruptured spleen.

Teacher Guan told me that when she was in Laogai Squad No. 2, the twelve of them were not only forced to do "reform through labor," but were also routinely beaten and abused. In October 1966, Teacher Guan secretly went to the State Council's Visitors' Reception Office, because she felt that the treatment of Laogai Squad No. 2 could not be in conformance with the Communist Party's official policy. She told the receptionist about all she had experienced since coming to China from overseas, and also submitted a written document.

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The next day, Teacher Guan was reprimanded for lodging a complaint at the reception office. The Red Guards were reveling in their so-called "Red August"; Mao Zedong had written a letter of support to them on August 1, making particular mention of their leader, Peng Xiaomeng, and Mao's wife Jiang Qing referred to them as "little suns." Peng Xiaomeng had stood on the rostrum of Tiananmen and made a speech that was broadcast live nationwide. However, as the striking range of the Cultural Revolution expanded, the Red Guards gradually lost power. After the Cultural Revolution, Peng Xiaomeng published articles about how she had been persecuted, yet she never mentioned how she and her Red Guard friends had tortured others—their teachers, their classmates and law-abiding residents near their school.

Teacher Guan told me that when she went to the Visitors' Reception Office, she had also brought up what was happening to someone else in Laogai Squad No. 2, but she did not mention Li Jie by name. Li Jie was subsequently transferred to "Laogai Squad No. 1," where she was beaten to death. Teacher Guan felt guilty.

I told Teacher Guan that it would not have helped if she had reported Li Jie's situation to the Visitors' Reception Office, and it might have even made things worse. I told her that in the

course of my research, I had come across one Hu Xiuzheng, a teacher at Beijing Normal University Attached Middle School who was persecuted in the summer of 1966. Because she believed the persecution was not in accordance with official policy, Hu had gone to the reception office to report the matter and submit the necessary documents. As a result, she was charged with a new crime, “overturning a Cultural Revolution verdict,” which was regarded as a “counterrevolutionary crime.” Hu was subsequently “segregated for investigation” and died in detention. This was a true story, not something I made up to comfort Teacher Guan.

But Teacher Guan was following a different train of thought. She said that after the Cultural Revolution she looked up Li Jie’s sister with the intention of doing something for Li Jie. But in 1966 she had not spoken up for Li Jie. She said that from a superficial standpoint this was because she and the other members of Laogai Squad No. 2 were all basically “clean,” while Li Jie, because of her relationship with the Japanese, had a “problematic” background. Teacher Guan told me that she actually knew what Li Jie’s “problem” was. But everybody makes mistakes – who can say he has never done anything wrong? Why should Li Jie be assigned to the *laogai* squad and savagely beaten for something that had happened 20 years before?

Teacher Guan said, “I knew it was wrong to beat Li Jie, but I said nothing, and I allowed her to be beaten to death. I feel that I wronged her.”

I wanted to tell her that the fault was with the system, not with her. But I did not say it. I believe she already knew that; she was referring to something else.

I suddenly recalled the story in the Bible in which people were planning to stone a prostitute to death. Jesus said to them, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” Everyone then dropped their stones and left.⁴ This story contains a profound truth, and I do not think the analogy is forced if applied to Li Jie’s story.

Many things that happened during the Cultural Revolution followed a single pattern: a person was identified as having a “problem,” then everybody else would come forward to “expose” and “struggle against” that person, throwing their stones at her or watching in indifference as others killed her. After the Cultural Revolution, many people insisted that they persecuted others out of “revolutionary idealism,” so they felt no need to apologize, to reflect on their deeds or to repent. They felt no tension in their hearts, nor any burden on their conscience.

Before we parted, Teacher Guan told me of her life philosophy and moral standpoint. I was happy to see that this outwardly plump and cheerful teacher was enthusiastically engaged in a keen moral pursuit. Her indelible memories of

the events of the Cultural Revolution, her sympathy for the pain of others, her clear analysis of herself and her penitence towards her own actions were all part of this moral pursuit.

I found similar qualities among some others with whom I spoke, and found that there was something connecting the four of them. One was the late writer Wang Xiaobo.⁵ The first time I talked with him, when I mentioned that I was researching the history of Cultural Revolution and its victims, Wang immediately told me that in his school, Beijing Erlong Road Middle School, a female teacher named Zhang Fang had been beaten by Red Guards in 1966 and committed suicide in 1968 after being “investigated” during the movement to “purify the class ranks.” Wang’s memory was clear and his tone was full of sympathy. He also felt he had the responsibility of helping me learn the truth. Not every writer of his generation was like that.

In regard to the Cultural Revolution, it is of crucial importance to speak the truth, admit mistakes, apologize to victims and repent of one’s actions. These acts are interrelated, but hold separate places on the moral scale. Repentance is a moral state. Those who do not enter this state will have difficulty comprehending it. Put another way, it would be like a low-grade computer being unable to run new software.

I wish I’d had an opportunity to speak more with Teacher Guan. In the days that followed, however, as I recorded Cultural Revolution stories, whenever I felt depressed and melancholic, I recalled Teacher Guan’s words on that hot summer afternoon. She revealed to me the power of mankind’s struggle towards goodness. Her repentance boosted my courage and my confidence.

Thank you, Teacher Guan.

Translated by Wang Ai

The original Chinese version of this article is available at http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/ywang/history/big5/Comment_text2.htm

NOTES

1. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong called for the destruction of the “Four Olds,” which were Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits and Old Ideas. As a result, many things connected with China’s culture and history were ransacked, burned and destroyed. In addition, intellectuals targeted as personifications of the Four Olds were harassed, detained or killed.
2. *Laogai* is the term for “reform through labor.”
3. *Niugui sheshen dui*, literally, “cow demons and snake spirit squad,” in reference to the terms assigned to “class enemies” such as teachers.
4. John 8:3–11.
5. Wang Xiaobo (1952–1997) was particularly known for his depictions of life during the Cultural Revolution.