

4/26/2006

Talk at Chicago Cultural Center

On Opera *Nixon in China*

In 1972, I was in a rubber tree farm in mountains as a “sent down youth” and four thousand kilometers away from Beijing where I grew up. Most workers in the farm could not read newspapers. So probably I can provide you a different angle to view the event.

Several months after President Nixon’s visit, we were asked to walk for one hour to go to a movie at the place of the farm’s headquarter. They put a piece of huge white fabric between two poles as screen and people sat on the ground of two sides of the screen and watched the documentary film on Nixon’s visit to China.

Since the Cultural Revolution started, all movies were banned and they did not make any new feature films. They just let people watch documentary films such as rallies and parades in Beijing for the national day or the Party’s anniversary.

When we were watching Zhou Enlai having a state dinner for President Nixon, I heard of some noises from surrounding. One of my roommates sitting next to me pushed me and said:

Can you hear? People are swallowing their saliva.

I sighed. We had a serious shortage of food. People could get fat and meat. Because of malnutrition, many people got hepatitis A. Pregnant women suffered more than others. A woman’s face was swollen and other could not see her eyes.

What caused it? It is not any natural disasters. It is the policy of Mao Zedong. The party prohibited farmers to raise pigs or chickens, did not allow people grow vegetables for themselves. So people could not get any fat or protein.

In my village, a man secretly planted a red pepper. The army representative in the farm pulled out the plant and held a “struggle session” against the man. He called the pepper plant is ‘a tail of capitalist’ that was the language the Party’s newspapers used. The army representative shouted: Down with capitalism.

Chinese civilization discourages people to show the desire for food openly. But after the long time starvation, the farmers could not control themselves in front of food on the screen of a film.

They did not pay much attention to Nixon or Zhou Enlai. Ten years later, the second day after I passed the oral defense for my thesis at Beijing University, I went to the robber tree farm and found that people had good food. Finally, people won and Mao Zedong’s ideas were defeated.

Watching the film is one of the moments that made me think about writing the history even though I cannot change anything in the history.

When I searched on the Internet for the opera Nixon in China and heard of the song “Whip her to death,” the first thought came up to me is: I know her name. Or, I know their names.

Over the last decades, I have been conducting interviews with those who experience the Cultural Revolution and collecting victims’ names. I started a web site six years ago and published a book for 700 people who were victimized in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.

I brought six pictures of those who were whipped to death as the lyrics say. Those women were high school and elementary teachers. They were killed by their Red Guard students in their schools.

Mao Zedong said: We will not allow the capitalist intellectuals to control our schools anymore. Then, the Red Guards started to attack their teacher.

The typical Red Guard's outfit is the army uniform and a leather belt with a heavy metal buckle. They just used the leather belt to whip their teachers. Many teachers were killed.

The scene in the opera is surreal, but also very real. When I listened to the song "whip her to death," I know that the word "ship" is not a metaphor, is not a rhetorical exaggeration.

It is Bian Zhongyun, mother of four. It is Tang Zheng, 36 year old when she died. It is He Dinghua, a retired elementary school teacher. It is Wang Qingping, a principal of elementary school in Beijing.

China has a long history of school. Confucius, the spiritual leader in pre-modern age in China was a teacher. However, in the later 1960's, many teachers were killed by their students.

40 year have past. But they were not allowed to be remembered. After 15 months being on the Internet, my web site was blocked in China. My book cannot be published in China.

Chinese colleagues will envy you because you made a wonderful opera and you can explore the past through such a powerful way. I hope that one day Chinese people also can get the freedom to do so for their history

