

Red Guards Say Sorry

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But China's Communist Party still honors Cultural Revolution instigator Mao Zedong.



AFP

A group of young Chinese Red Guards march in Beijing, August, 1966.

HONG KONG—A group of former "Red Guards," Mao Zedong's army of students who denounced and persecuted teachers, doctors, and other authority figures in the name of revolution, have made a rare public apology to their former teachers.

Now in their sixties, former Red Guards Shen Xiaoke, Hu Bin, and Guo Canhui apologized publicly to former teachers whom they beat and spit on during the political chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), according to an article in the Guangzhou-based Southern Weekend newspaper.

They apologized for mistreating former Beijing Foreign Language Institute teacher Cheng Bi, 86, retired middle-school teacher Guan Qiulan, 81, and Li Huangguo, a retired teacher from the Beijing Mineral Industry Auxiliary Middle School, 79.

China has yet to authorize any national event in memory of this period in the nation's history, and many still bear privately the scars of a time when neighbors, colleagues, and families denounced, attacked, and even killed one another in a frenzy of mass political "struggle."

U.S.-based author Zheng Yi, who was in the middle of his studies at Beijing's prestigious Qinghua University during the Cultural Revolution, said that while the apologies come late, they are still meaningful.

"Right from the time that the Cultural Revolution ended, we should have seen such acts," Zheng said. "It has taken until today, and the people doing the apologizing are all in their

sixties."

"Of course a late apology is better than no apology," he said.

U.S.-based editor Hu Ping said he was at high school in the southwestern city of Chengdu during the 1960s.

"Of course it's late," Hu said. "A lot of the victims have already died."

"They should have been apologizing much earlier for the wrongs that they did to them."

"Nonetheless, we should recognize this apology as sincere, and we should still encourage it," he said.

Numbers unconfirmed

The Cultural Revolution has been officially labeled a "mistake of Mao Zedong and the Gang of Four, who launched the initial 1966 campaign against "capitalist roader" officials.

In the ensuing mayhem, qualified professionals like teachers and doctors were locked up in "cow pens," while schools and universities were closed and health services fell into disarray under the supervision of "revolutionaries."

While the true number of casualties remains unconfirmed to this day, Southern Weekend quoted official statistics as saying that 1,772 people died nationwide in the violence, which was encouraged by then supreme leader Mao Zedong, the "Red Sun" of the era.

Recent research in the southern city of Shantou alone has shown that 100,000 people were accused as criminals, more than 4,500 were injured or disabled, and some 400 people died.

Chen, Hu and Guo had taken part in more violent "struggle sessions" than those involving the teachers named, the paper said, hinting at other victims who had died.

It said the students had written to their former victims to beg their forgiveness.

'A good start'

Retired teacher Cheng Bi replied in a letter: "You have made a good start," the paper said.

"This case was not an isolated one, even though public apologies are still rare before the entire historical truth is made known," the article said.

The article said the letters sprang from shelved plans to hold a moment of silence for the victims of the Cultural Revolution during a 50th anniversary celebration at the Beijing

Foreign Languages Institute.

Instead, the master of ceremonies merely expressed regret that principal Mo Ping, who died in 1968 after suffering severe beatings at the hands of Red Guards, "and others," could not attend the celebration.

Zheng said that none of the former Red Guards featured in the report were leading figures in the movement, which was unleashed by Mao Zedong as a way of gaining ascendancy once and for all over his political opponents.

He said many of the leaders of the Red Guards were the sons and daughters of high-ranking cadres close to Mao Zedong, and that many of the teachers "struggled" by their students in Beijing were beaten to death.

"These people [who apologized] all followed other people's lead and joined in," Zheng said.

Mao still honored

And he said that none of the apologies would make any difference to the ruling Communist Party while it still espoused the political ideology of "Mao Zedong Thought."

Communist Party leaders in Beijing still permit no national memorial to the Cultural Revolution, although officials in Guangdong's Shantou city built a museum in 2006, honoring those who died in the southern province.

The museum, which is privately financed and advertises only discreetly on the Internet, sits at the top of Tashan, a mountain where many of the Cultural Revolution dead from the nearby city of Shantou were buried.

Zheng said the leaders of the most violent attacks of the period have remained mute so far.

"We haven't heard an apology from a single one of the key assassins, the ones who went around beating people to death, or those who incited such acts of violence and bloodshed: the instigators and leaders," he said.

"Individual apologies by Red Guards aren't going to change the fact that the Chinese Communist Party still daren't face up to history," Zheng said.

Reported by Shi Shan for RFA's Mandarin service. Translated and written in English by Luisetta Mudie.

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