

The Party Never Sleeps (Part 3)

Read [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#)

an excerpt from *Bearing Witness: Coming of Age in Mao's China*

by [Manyin Li](#) (June 2020)



Falling Chinese Golden Fishes, Victor Wang

1. Remedial Political Study

A large truck was parked in front of the dormitory. It was covered all around tightly with green canvas. When I got aboard, my fellow reactionary group members, C. Wu and F. Ding, another classmate of mine, S. Dong, and a guy with the surname Qiu from the cadre class, who had been disclosed as a member of the Nationalist Party's youth league, were sitting on the floor against their luggage. It was now clear that the five of us were the "counter-revolutionaries" exposed in this great campaign. Our class won the championship, four out of the five from this class.

The four boys looked up at me but quickly lowered their heads again. Along the way, no one dared exchange even a glance, let alone words. There were no cadres or guards in the truck, but who could guarantee a move or even a look would not be reported by one of the other four?

I surmised that everyone else in the truck, just like me, had a question on his mind: "Where are we going?" As we could not see the outside, there was no way to know where the truck was heading. We did not even have a clue of the direction.

In about an hour or so, the truck came to a state of stop and go. We must have entered a city with traffic lights. Soon, the truck no longer moved. This place could not be far from Shanghai, I thought. Then, the canvas at the rear was lifted,

and to my surprise, J. Lu's head appeared. His presence was totally unexpected. I did not see him coming with us; he had been sitting in the driver's cabin. He told us to get off.

We were in front of a tall building with four big characters on the façade: "Bank of Industrial Enterprises." Was this not in the center of Shanghai? Jiangxi Road, the location of the former Bank of Industrial Enterprises near the Bund! This was more unexpected to me.

The building was constructed in the 1920s by the British. We took the elevator to the fifth floor. A woman accompanied me to the girls' quarter. There were four double decked beds in the room, most of which were already occupied. I was a latecomer. A good-looking girl, older than I, leaning on her folded blankets on one of the upper beds, was entertaining herself by reciting a famous soliloquy from a Beijing Opera program known as "Farewell My Concubine": *"Since I followed Lord Chu, I have engaged in wars both in the east and west . . . "*

Her reciting was charming, with an authentic Beijing flavor.

I sat on the edge of my bed in a daze, not knowing what to do, or what I could do. The girl noticed my presence and stopped chanting, asking me, "Which school are you from?"

"Shanghai Electrical Technology School," I said. "And you?"

“East China Institute of Chemical Industry.” She was a college student.

“What is this place?” I asked her.

“A special political class organized by the city’s higher education bureau. Students are from all the colleges and universities in Shanghai. You are from a secondary technology school, aren’t you? So technology school students must also be included,” she said, quite informatively.

No sooner than she had finished, a young man came in. She got out of bed and said to me, “See you later” and was gone with him. Surprised, I began to sense a certain degree of freedom here.

I kept sitting there, still at a loss. After a while, two girls came in and took their bowls and chopsticks. They saw me on their way out, and one of them said to me with a sweet smile, “It’s supper time. Are you not going to eat?”

I hastened to pick up my bowl and chopsticks and walked out after them.

The hall was filled with young men and women a few years older than I, lining up to get food. I ate alone in silence while people around me were talking and laughing. The talks were lively, and the atmosphere was cheerful. I slowly realized that no one was here to monitor us, and everybody could speak

and act normally. The food was good, much better than we used to have at the technology school, perhaps due to the higher food allowance for college students.

Right after supper, we all attended an orientation meeting. A red cloth banner with the characters "1955 Shanghai College Graduates Political Class" was hung in the middle of the front wall of the hall. A leading cadre spoke to us: "You have graduated in your profession but have not graduated in political study. Therefore, you are here to have remedial political lessons."

Remedial political lessons! I never heard this term previously. Quite novel! Normally, a student who failed a subject would have to study it all over again at school, but failure in political study was rare. Here, we were put in this specially created remedial political class no student had ever experienced, and perhaps no student would have in the future. Actually, this was a form of reeducation for those students who had been suspected, without legal evidence, of being counterrevolutionary.

"You are here to transform your reactionary thoughts with the theoretical weapon of Marxism and Mao Zedong's Thoughts," the leading cadre continued. "The construction of our motherland is in urgent need of people with special skills. You've been trained by the Party and the people for many years, and you should repay them. The sooner you have transformed your thinking, the earlier you will have a job." According to him, it was up to us to decide how soon we could transform our thinking and be qualified for a job.

There were about two hundred students in this special class. We were going to read books, listen to lectures and speeches and then have group discussions, talking about what we gained from the lectures, and write reports on how we have transformed our thinking, the same procedures we had been familiar with in all political studies. There would be after-class recreational activities as well, such as playing table tennis, dancing, performance and the like. After all, this was a class, not a labor camp.

Each school had sent at least one cadre student to "help" us. We were encouraged to report to them if there were any problems regarding our thinking or daily life. So, J. Lu was not merely escorting us to this place but would stay with us throughout the reeducation. At leisure time, we were allowed to go to the street but not far so as to be late to or absent from classes or discussions. Best of all, students who had homes in Shanghai were allowed to go home on weekends.

After the orientation, we felt like prisoners just being released. C. Wu, F. Ding, S. Dong and I immediately got together. Each of us had a ton of words to speak, like water rushing out of a dam suddenly opened, and all of us spoke at the same time. Finally, we had to calm down and speak one by one, or no one could be heard.

S. Dong, always a fast talker, said that he was forced to confess even earlier than the rest of us were. He had complex social connections. However complicated they were, he finally reached the point that nothing more was to be confessed. But "they," the revolutionary activists, did not believe him and repeatedly forced him to confess more. He, though well-known for his cleverness, was at the end of his wits and began to

fabricate stories. "They" took the stories seriously. Their investigations, however, revealed that these stories did not match the reality. "They" got so angry that he was blamed for deliberate trouble making. For this, he was severely censured. Upon hearing his dramatic narrative, I laughed so hard that my stomach hurt.

C. Wu's account was more relevant to me. He said that the first time he heard Principal Zhang's mentioning of a reactionary organization with the intention to create a publication, he immediately suspected that it was aimed at us. His suspicion was confirmed when he found that the three of us were assigned to different groups. He realized things were going badly and quickly started to confess. C. Wu was more mature than I was, and more politically alert, too. I had never dreamed that we were considered a small reactionary group. I could not comprehend the connection between the intent to publish a magazine and the formation of a "small reactionary group," even after "they" revealed it to me.

C. Wu believed that why he was picked as a major object of purge had its root in an incident that occurred last year. He had talked defiantly to Principal Zhang about the unfairness of scoring of the performance of our class in the school Games. He even had the guts to criticize the principal and demanded that he correct the score. C. Wu knew he was the culprit and said apologetically, "I'm just sorry for having involved F. Ding and M. Li in this mess."

My answer to his apology was this: "Principal Zhang had a bad opinion of you, and no doubt he was against you out of personal revenge. But, even if you had not offended him, the reckoning of the intended publication of *Tide Front* was

inescapable." Nobody disagreed with this. Later, it became even clearer to me that the Party leader of an institute, such as our school, had to fulfill the task of picking enemies under the instruction of the Central Committee and Chairman Mao. Who were the ones they would pick? Two kinds: those with negative records in their FILES and those disliked by the Party leaders. C. Wu met both criteria.

Another incident, which occurred in City of Changchun when we had our fieldwork at the first and then only auto manufacturing plant of our country, made C. Wu more suspicious in the eyes of the school leaders. He wrote an article in the *Blackboard News Weekly* to criticize the teachers in charge of our class. It stated that the teachers were more interested in sightseeing and shopping than in caring about students' needs. He not only wrote the article but asked other students to sign behind his name. As the head of our class, he took the lead to report to the teachers the difficulties encountered by students, which was perfectly alright in my view. He wrote the article only after the teachers ignored his report. This act, however, was more than enough for both the teachers and Principal Zhang to view him as a dangerous element who dared confront the leadership and had the ability to make other students follow him.

Besides, there was more to elicit suspicion. The third incident, though, was even more absurd. Approaching graduation, C. Wu bought a second-hand camera from a store of consignment and carried it around the campus at his leisure time to take pictures. He never expected that someone would suspect him of being a spy and reported his photo-taking to the leadership. This had become another focus of the Eliminating Counterrevolutionaries Campaign against him.

F. Ding admitted that he was a coward, especially when he became the object of such a mass movement. He explained, in his slow manner, that he had talked nonsense in replying to interrogators. Later, however, his good conscience led him to think of the other two people involved, referring to C. Wu and me. He realized that his nonsense might cause harm to us, so he withdrew his testimony. (Now I knew the source of those untrue charges I was subjected to during the interrogations.) F. Ding hoped that we would not hate him. I was forgiving in nature, so I did not hate him. Besides, I had personally experienced the same huge pressure and understood how a person under such pressure could lose his mind. F. Ding had said something untrue, and that was bad; it, however, did not have a significant impact on the whole thing. Whether his confession was true or not, the conclusion of a "small reactionary group" had been already determined, way before any interrogations took place.

When it was finally my turn to speak, I told my "accomplices" how my superficial smartness and born dullness had brought me big trouble. "They" upbraided me for being "cunning and wily," even though I was actually the most stupid one, who had neither made confessions without being forced, nor fabricated "facts" to please the revolutionaries. No wonder they accused me of being "the most stubborn reactionary element."

As we spoke freely, I felt that everything somehow sounded more like a joke, forgetting the pains we all had just experienced.

That night, when I lay in the bed, recalling the entire ordeal

of the Campaign of Eliminating Counterrevolutionaries, I could not hold my chuckle. It was a nightmare but also a farce. We had been "hidden enemies;" the struggle between "THEM" and "US" had been a desperate one between "revolution and counter-revolution," even "a matter of life and death." "They" were fully mobilized and acted in a big way as if fighting against the most ferocious enemies; "we" were treated as captives. After six months of much ado, the outcome of the campaign turned out to be nothing more than "the reeducation of students having failed in political studies!"

The campaign was carried out in strange ways, frequently making a big show of force but sometimes appearing illusory as if "they" did not know what they were really doing. After everything had been clearly revealed, why did "they" keep us in confinement for months? I concluded that it was because no instructions came from "their" superiors, so "they" did not know how to end it. If we had only "failed in political studies," was it necessary for them to go all out against us? Was this not supposed to be a campaign to eliminate the hidden counter-revolutionaries? Except for the guy surnamed Qiu, a member of the Nationalist Party's Youth League who could be considered belonging to the counterrevolutionary camp, where were the counterrevolutionaries at our school? Judged by my own case, I could easily imagine what kind of "problems" all the graduates here in this special class had with the Communist Party.

As the decision making within the CP was always in a black box, no one could know what really happened to cause the Campaign of Eliminating Counter-Revolutionaries, which opened with a cut-throat class struggle, to end in a mild educational gathering. This unexpected twist led a political fool like me to believe that the sky had turned blue again after the storm

was over, or, as a more poetic saying goes: "the ripples had faded without a trace after the boat sailed away." The first morning of the remedial political class, I woke up feeling good and could not help humming a cheerful Russian song: "*May is wonderful, May is good! May makes me feel merry . . .*" Although it was winter time, it seemed to me that spring had come in advance.

I did learn two lessons, though. The first: under the proletarian dictatorship, the discussion of or planning for socio-political activities in private by two, or more, people are not allowed. The leadership of the Communist Party was above all else, and all activities not sponsored, organized, or permitted by the Party were reactionary, and, thus, sinful. The second: never offend your boss, the Number One Party boss in particular, because he can always wait for a legitimate opportunity in the next political campaign to retaliate against you. From now on, I so thought, I would be all right if I stay away from political or social activities and lay low to live a quiet life. Later happenings proved that I was too simple minded.

What I did not know then was my being put in a secretly registered list never entrusted by the Party. I was not aware that I was under constant surveillance. Nominally, I was a citizen but secretly I was a potential enemy. No matter what I did, or did not do, I was always a political suspect. I was viewed and treated by the leadership of any place, be it a school, a factory, or a residential organization, as a potential counter-revolutionary element. The heaviness of my FILE became a burden that I could never get rid of throughout my later life. It dictated my personal life in a subtle but such a powerful way that my marriage became a mess. It is not an exaggeration to say that in every step of my later life,

the Communist Party had its sway.

As to the purpose of the Eliminating Counter-Revolutionaries Campaign, I gradually realized years later that its "victory" was not based on how many so-called "hidden counter-revolutionary elements" were actually exposed and punished; rather, its goal was to nip any heretical thinking in the bud so as to completely prevent any possible heretical actions from happening.

Only after the effects of this campaign on my later life gradually unfolded, did I realize that the proletarian dictatorship was not content with the use of public security and judicial means. In addition, it created extended means. Mass dictatorship was a high-handed means; secret supervision of those with possible heretical thinking was the hidden means. The ultimate goal of both was the transformation of everybody's thinking. If this goal could not be reached, for force might change what people say but could not completely change what they think, the Party could at least achieve its lowest goal: everyone becoming a conformist, not to speak or act in a way inconsistent with the Party's. By means of mass movements, the Party not only punished the five percent but warned the majority of the ninety-five percent. Thus, all hundred percent were scared and yielded.

2 Worshiping of Chairman Mao

Our class, though remedial in nature, was a very formal one. Lessons included the history of social development, dialectical materialism, historical materialism, and the

history of the Chinese Communist Party. Current issues such as cooperative agriculture and the controlled procurement, marketing and distribution of agricultural goods were also part of the study. Although we had learned most of these subjects at school, we had to learn them all over again as detained students. After 6 months of out-of-jail confinement, intimidating interrogation, harsh denunciation, and forced self-criticism, all students in this remedial class learned at least one thing in common: say whatever the Party wanted you to say, and never make your true thinking known to others. The happy result was every student passing the remedial course in four months, even though true reformation in political thinking was doubtful. Could there be a measure for the effectiveness of the political reeducation after the students had learned to be hypocritical? Certainly not. I guess that the Party was aware of the unreliability of verbal expressions but let it pass at the moment. Perhaps that was the reason why the students of the remedial political class were never trusted by the Party and had to be secretly monitored all their lives.

One day in the spring of 1956, all detained students were called to gather in the hall to listen to Mayor Chen Yi's important speech on radio. This speech signified the rejuvenation of the Party's policy on intellectuals. The Mayor of Shanghai was one of the two dozen or so members of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CCP; his speech must have been authorized by the Standing Committee of the Politburo and Chairman Mao. Below is the message he delivered in Sichuan dialect as accurately as I can remember:

"Intellectuals are not a class, but a stratum of a class. They used to attach themselves to the landlord class and bourgeois class. Now that the landlords and bourgeoisie, as classes, no

longer exist, what are the intellectuals going to do? You know this old saying: 'Without the skin, what is the hair attached to?' They can only be dependent on the proletarian class. In other words, bourgeois intellectuals can serve the proletariat; they can be transformed to become a member of the proletarian class."

The mayor also expounded the relationship between being "red" and "expert." His remark on this issue was quite different from the past slogan: "becoming red before becoming expert." He said that there was no first or second in the importance of being red and expert. Intellectuals should strive for becoming both red and expert, but it was OK to become expert before becoming red. "In any case," the mayor concluded: "Intellectuals are a revolutionary component in the productive forces."

Everybody who listened to this speech was happily surprised and jubilant. The Party's policy toward intellectuals had always been "Uniting, Transforming, and Utilizing," under which, they had always been the objects of criticism and transforming since 1949. This was the first time we saw a real difference, from someone who was to be transformed and utilized to someone who could become one of the proletarian class. In the whole nation, all intellectuals now had the feeling of getting out of the dark clouds and seeing the blue sky, meaning from now on, the Party would value their knowledge and expertise, so they could bring their talents into full play.

We were detained students and could not be considered intellectuals, but our future seemed brighter as well. (In those days, even graduates from secondary vocational schools

were viewed as petty intellectuals.) In this year of 1956, the Party and its government at all levels did make significant changes to improve intellectuals' lives, work conditions, remunerations, and other aspects. This was a honeymoon between the Communist Party and Chinese intellectuals, except it turned out to be a very short one (which ended with the Anti-Rightists Movement barely a year later).

In such a hopeful and relaxed atmosphere, a number of students of the remedial class, including me, were given jobs and sent to Beijing for further assignment. J. Lu wished us well upon our departure. Having finished his special task, he was to work for the Party Committee at the privileged Jiaotong University in Shanghai, where a future leader of the CP as well as the President of China, Jiang Zemin, had studied. In the last four months, we had gotten to know J. Lu better. Although he acted like a vicious fiend during the political campaign, he was not a nasty person otherwise. He even had a good sense of humor. As a person dedicated to the revolution, he would still be engaged in the political line. That was his profession even though he graduated from a technology school. (Cadre students such as J. Lu were sent to learn technology just for the purpose of obtaining a certain degree of knowledge in science and technology so that they would have better ability to do their real job.)

In Beijing, we were paid but had no work to do yet. We happily enjoyed visiting historical places such as the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and the Summer Palace as well as authentic Beijing Operas and the best plays in the nation while waiting for specific job assignment.

May First was the official Labor Day in Communist China and

one of the two major festivals of the People's Republic, the other being National Day on Oct 1st. We were informed to participate in the Labor Day parade at Tiananmen Square. I had previously seen documentaries of the parades with Chairman Mao standing on the Tiananmen Tower and waving to the huge throng of people below. Now I had the luck to take part in the event in person and actually see our great leader. How exciting! Hundreds of millions of people would have liked having this opportunity, but how many were as lucky as I was!

I never blamed Chairman Mao for the Eliminating Hidden Counterrevolutionaries Campaign that made me suffer for no reason, even though I knew he had been in command. It was quite unexplainable, even incomprehensible. As I admitted earlier, either I was born the most stupid person in the whole world, or my mind was in a pitiful mess. The personality worship of the great leader was so firmly rooted in this mess that even six months of persecution was not enough to clean it up. The traditional thinking in imperial China believed that the Emperor was always good, and it was the official executives to blame for all the bad things that happened. This belief perhaps was also embedded in my sub-conscious. Put more accurately, Communist brainwashing had shaped my mind to such a state that my faith in the Party and Chairman Mao was not shaken by the absurdities and irrationalities in what the revolutionaries had done to me. My true waking up had to wait for ten more years when the Cultural Revolution's craziness shocked me. Back in 1956, I was still one of the frantic worshippers of Chairman Mao.

On May Day, I got up early at five o'clock and joined the team of the office workers of the Radio Industry Bureau at the East Chang'an Avenue around six. The spring morning was chilly. Standing in the same place and waiting was most unbearable. If

I had known we would have to wait for hours, I would have brought a piece of newspaper so that I could spread it on the ground and sit on it.

It was too early. We had to kill time in some way. We started to sing: *Singing for Our Motherland, Socialism is Great, We Workers Are Powerful, A River with Broad Waves, Little Sparrow, White Cloud Floating in the Blue Sky, Red Berries Blooming, The Anthem of the People's Liberation Army*, etc., etc., until we ran out of songs.

To get rid of boredom, someone began to tell jokes. After the jokes were exhausted, I looked at my watch. It was only seven fifty-five. Someone said that he should have brought a pack of cards. What a pity! Nobody had cards with him. Another suggested solving riddles. I was good at riddle solving and liked the idea.

Just as we were having fun with riddles, a loud voice came out of the microphone: "Attention! Line up! The parade is about to begin in minutes." We quickly pulled ourselves together, waiting for the solemn moment in high spirits. Somehow, this time, the 15 minutes were particularly long, as if time was suspended and nine o'clock would never come.

Just at the moment I was least attentive, the music of the national anthem suddenly poured out of the loud speaker. We stood straight, awe-inspired. The melody of this song seemed to have a magical effect on me, and all distractions were expelled. "*Singing for Our Motherland*" followed next. This has been the most popular song in the People's Republic since the

early 1950s, and still is today. The number of people who have sung it and the length of time it has remained popular have probably created a world record. It always evoked patriotic feelings in me. As I see it now, the lyricist and composer of this song have rendered a great service to the Communist Party, by succeeding in mixing the motherland and the Communist state into one and deeply rooting the idea that the motherland was China and China was the People's Republic in the mind and heart of every Chinese of many generations, even though motherland and the state are two different concepts.

Under the spell of patriotism, we shouted: "Long Live the People's Republic of China" again and again. We also shouted: "Celebrate the May First Labor Day!" "The World's Proletariat, Unite!" and "Down with Imperialism!" Finally, we shouted with every bit of our strength: "Long live the Communist Party of China!" "Long live Chairman Mao, long live, forever!"

Even though the parade had started, we continued to stand in the same spot and waited for a long time, because the order of the parade was first the army, second the workers, third the peasants, and we office workers, the last. We had to wait for our turn until all of the soldiers, workers, and peasants finished marching.

After shouting countless slogans, our team finally began to move. We immediately forgot the three hours suffering from cold, boredom, and fatigue. As we proceeded from east to west with footsteps gradually accelerating, excitement rose with the sound of each slogan and the thought that we were about to see our great leader Chairman Mao in minutes. More and more people were gathering on the roadside to see the procession. Reporters, carrying large and heavy professional cameras, ran

up and down the street. (I once dreamed of becoming a journalist when I was at junior high. Now I realized that this wasn't an easy job, for one could not do it without physical strength.) There were also people wearing red armbands along the way in every section of the road to maintain order and control progress.

When approaching Tiananmen Tower, we began to form a row with eight paraders, and the distance between rows was extended to about ten feet. We marched with chests and heads up, keeping pace with the rhythm of the music. Meanwhile, all eyes were aimed at the front right while we kept shouting slogans.

All of a sudden, my eyes caught unusual brightness. I saw the white marble bridge over the Golden Water, red walls, Chairman Mao's huge picture in the middle of the tall wall, and a row of huge red lanterns hung high. This was Tiananmen Tower.

All the heads of the paraders neatly turned to the right; thousands of eyes stared at the leaders of our country on the tower. More accurately, the target was only one: Chairman Mao standing in the middle. Was it not he, big and tall, with broad forehead, waving a hat in his hand? It was too far away to see his features clearly. What a pity! But yes, it was he, our great leader Chairman Mao! I saw Chairman Mao! The excitement of the crowd reached its highest point. All of us shouted with all our strength: "Long live Chairman Mao! Long live forever!" Other slogans were forgotten; this was the only one repeatedly chanted. We kept shouting and shouting. Some of the paraders jumped up high; others held high the small flags or the bunches of paper flowers in their hands, higher than others, as if trying to outdo other paraders so that Chairman Mao might see them in the midst of numerous marchers.

Regardless of our excitement, we were not allowed to stop. Therefore, all heads had to turn further to the right with the pace of progress. We turned our heads more and more to the right and even backward, so as not to lose sight of our great leader. We wished that our necks had the ability to turn 360 degrees. Due to the limited range of motion of our necks as well as the rule not to stop, the tall and burly image of Chairman Mao was finally no longer visible.

Having left the opportunity to worship our great leader to paraders behind us, we suddenly felt a loss of energy. I felt exhausted, dragged on as if my legs were as heavy as lead. My mouth was dry, with no saliva. The whole team suddenly became messy and scattered in all directions in unsteady steps, looking as unseemly as a group of defeated soldiers.

I was surprised to find that when I was with thousands of people in the worshiping ritual, my mood was automatically infected by the public, and I was no longer my usual self. I was energized by the atmosphere, just as a balloon swells by the input of air. I acted as part of the collective body. I even went frantic and would do things that I would not do alone. Now, as the ritual was over, the invisible power that had controlled me and infected my behavior also left me. As a result, I fell into a state of physical and mental prostration, like a person who had just experienced an illness. And I could see that other paraders were in the similar state. In that state, we managed to hold out and finally got to Fuxing Gate. At this point, came the announcement of dismissal. What a relief !

I had no idea where to go because that was not part of the rehearsal we had had before the parade. I followed my co-paraders and walked to the nearest small street. In seconds, I found myself in a tightly packed crowd. I was frightened. I could not walk on my own but was pushed forward by the people behind me. Worse, the crowd was growing as more and more dismissed paraders joined it. My body completely lost the freedom to move by my own will. I heard somebody screaming: "Stop pressing me! Stop! You are killing me!" Another complained loudly: "Oh! You are stepping on my foot! I mean, you!"

As a matter of fact, no one was able to control his movement. No police were there to maintain order, and all the people who originally came with me seemed to have evaporated. I felt lonely and helpless. I also felt short of breath due to the pressure from the people pressing me. A panic grabbed me, because I was aware that people could die in this kind of packed crowd. I could be killed if a stampede occurred. I was young; I did not want to die here.

I mustered up all the strength from every cell of my body trying to edge through the crowd sideways so I could get out at the next alley. But the crowd was rocking and moving slowly like a giant, and the tiny me was too weak to get rid of it. Luckily, a big guy in front of me was forcing his way sideward and able to move slowly to the left side of the street. I firmly grasped a corner of his outfit and followed him to get out of the tight encirclement. Thanks to heaven, my life was saved!

Exhausted, I threw myself into bed as soon as I returned to the hotel where I had been staying. I slept soundly all

afternoon and rested, and that picked up my spirits and energy. As I was still alive, the horrible scene in the small street was completely out of my mind.

I joined the collective dancing festival in the evening in Tiananmen Square. I sang and danced with happy strangers under the sky lit up by the colorful fireworks. I was happy, too. Six months ago, in the evening of the last National Day, I was at a loss when experiencing the feeling of being excluded. Now I returned to the collective body. What a big difference! No more accusation of "a small reactionary group member;" no punishment, let alone criminal charges. I would soon have a job. I had plenty of reasons for rejoicing. I felt good; I was young; I sang; I danced. I did not anticipate any traps waiting for me down the road.

Epilogue

The reader with the interest to read through my story may think that my ordeal in 1955 had a happy ending. Even I myself thought that way when I danced and sang on the evening of May 1st in 1956 with patriotic feelings and great hope for my future. It turns out what happened on that May Day served as a metaphor with a prophetic meaning. Despite my desire and effort to have solidarity with the crowd in the adoration of Chairman Mao, this collective body had almost killed me, and the same pattern would occur over and over again in the next 30 years of my life in China.

The statistics of the 1955 Campaign of the Eliminating Hidden Counter-Revolutionaries are as follows:

The number of those who were formally examined is about 1,400,000; among them those identified as Counter-revolutionaries numbered 81,000; among the 81,000 only 3800 plus were judged to be actual current counter-revolutionaries, less than 0.3% of all those formally examined. (Pgs 70-71, *First Volume of A Complete History of the Anti-Rightists Movement* by Zhu Zheng, in Chinese. The English translation is mine.)

All the students who had to take the "remedial political course" belonged to the 1,319,000 (1,400,000 minus 81000). They were obviously wronged. Yet, the Party never did anything to correct the wrong. Instead, it proclaimed that they were treated leniently due to a policy change, which is probably true; otherwise, we could have wound up in labor camps. The more than 1.3 million, however, had a strong feeling of being wronged, and many of them, in the Open Airing of Views period in 1957, questioned the legitimacy and fairness of the 1955 Campaign. To their dismay, all of those who raised the question were subsequently labeled as Rightists and severely punished.

Since Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, many works have been published on the 1957 Anti-Rightists Movement, in which more than 550 thousand intellectuals were persecuted, and some view the later movement as a continuation and expansion of the 1955 Campaign. Very few works actually cover the 1955 campaign per se; those that do touch on it only mention the victims later persecuted as Rightists. None of them says anything about the after-effects on the lives of the wronged 1.3 million. This is a forgotten group of victims. This piece tries to provide a glimpse of what actually

happened in 1955 to them with my own experience, as I was one of them, with the intention to make up the missing block in the puzzle of the recent history of China.

Some may ask why I write this piece now, sixty-five years after 1955. The major reasons are cognitive (I mean relating to my understanding). The first reason was my being unable to see the impact of the 1955 Campaign on my whole life as I finally see it. Much like a slave with the word "slave" etched on his face or someone carrying a scarlet letter on her chest, I had a similar sign on me, but with this difference: theirs were publicly known and known to themselves whereas I did not even know it. The second reason is my being deceived by the Party's negation of the Cultural Revolution after Mao's death and the change in its priority from class struggle to economic development. I had thought that a party with the desire and ability of self-reformation could change itself. The June Fourth Tiananmen massacre in 1989 shattered my hope. That was the moment I entertained the idea to write a memoir to reveal the absurdity and recurring atrocity under Communist rule, the 1955 campaign being an early event of that nature. Last, but not least, as I finally had the time to write a memoir in my retirement, one thing confused me.

Communist China is now quite different from 1955 under Mao. After all, it has abandoned the theory and practice of class struggle and no longer employs mass movement to persecute those the Party views as heretics, and "counterrevolutionary" has been removed from the list of criminal offenses. The Party has focused on economic development and most of the Chinese are enjoying a much better material life than ever before. They now have freedom of choice with regard to their studies and professions which my generation did not have. They even enjoy a considerable degree of freedom of speech as long as

what one talks and writes in public does not cross the "red line."

Most prominently, China has realized modernization and becomes second only to the US in terms of economic power. For more than a century, to become a power and resume past glory by modernization has been the dream of all Chinese, me included. Naturally, whoever is able to modernize China has the legitimacy to lead China and expand its influence over the rest of the world. In such circumstances, who cares about a young student's ordeal in the past, not to mention that hers was far less tragic than many, many others that have taken place in China since 1949. Therefore, my 1955 story remains in my unfinished memoir.

That is only part of the story, however. In recent years, more and more facts have shown that the Communist one-party rule has not changed and will not change its nature. What has changed is only the means of rule. The Party is still persecuting religious groups; it's still suppressing people with dissenting views but by seemingly legal means, accusing them of fabricated crimes such as financial fraud or whoredom; it's still trying to control people's thinking by monitoring the internet and arresting influential human rights defenders and bloggers, even though its Constitution promises freedom of speech; it's still suppressing protesters and petitioners, including veterans who had fought for the Party; it's still above the law, even though its leader verbally advocates the rule of law. In the 1950s, the Communist Party condemned three young students merely discussing a yet-to-be-published magazine; today, it's still suppressing organized groups the Party deems a threat, real or imagined, to its rule.

The so-called "Learning Camps" or "Reeducation Centers" in Xinjiang strikes a sensitive chord in my brain. What a familiar term! Without due process, the Party and its government have rounded up about a million Uighur Muslims and put them in "Learning Camps" to wash their brains while depriving them of freedom, just as the Party did to me in 1955. From the seemingly benign "remedial political study class" in 1955 to the "reeducation camps" of today, the goal is the same: the suppression of freedom of thinking and speech by forceful brainwashing.

The lack of common ways of thinking and language in the conversations between the US and China always gets my attention. Yes, cultural difference is a factor, but it can be understood and lessened by patience and good communications. The real problem lies in the ways of thinking due to ideological difference. Take the "Learning Camps" in Xinjiang as an example. While the West criticizes its violation of human rights, the CCP considers it a more effective way to resolve the conflicts between the Uighur Muslims and the CCP, and even more humane, than bloody suppression. The arrogance of power, growing more than ever in recent years, irrational logic, chameleonic inconsistency, sheer bullying, deceitful artifice, and extreme absurdity I personally experienced seem deeply rooted in the Communists' thinking and doings, only worsening, as manifested in all the repressive practices today. I now see what happened to me in 1955 as a milder form of persecution and the repressive means today as an upgraded but more sinister and secret version.

The Communist Party has redressed numerous wrong cases, but it has never apologized to the victims. In the last 40 years, people have hoped for a genuine and honest retrospection for the disasters Mao brought to China and the Chinese people and

a sincere apology from the Party. But, that never happened, and will not happen. As holding on to power is the top priority of the CCP, its leaders think that allowing criticism of Mao would lead to the downfall of the Party rule. This thinking could be wrong, because honest admission of past wrongdoings and sincere apology to the people may actually create a new social contract between the Party and the people and usher in positive political reform to build democratic socialism. Tragically, it's impossible to change the Party's peculiar way of thinking.

The current Party leader is defending Mao and the Cultural Revolution with the excuse that it is the price the Chinese people must pay for the search of means and ways to build socialism, which is a revision of the Party's 1981 History Resolution negating the Cultural Revolution. Now more than ever, more and more signs show that the ideological base of the Cultural Revolution and the next generation of Red Guards do exist in and out of the Party.

What has been happening in China since Mao's death tells us that we cannot expect the CCP to face history honestly. People must not keep quiet but, instead, take up the weapon of criticism. In this sense, it is never too late to reveal the tragedies and absurdities under Mao. So far to this day, what has been done in this respect is far from enough.

The United States and the Western world have naively believed that the Communist Party of China would change by embracing market economy and be assimilated into the world with reason and honesty. They have finally begun to wake up and see the CCP's peculiar logic and crafty dishonesty to the point of extreme absurdity which I have learned since 1955.

Finally, my very special thanks go to Dr. Howard Ruttenberg, my mentor at York College. Without his challenging encouragement and editorial help this memoir could not have appeared as published.

Feb of 2020

«[Previous Article](#) [Home Page](#) [Next Article](#)»

Manyin Li was a student at York College of the City University of New York after she immigrated from China to the US in the late 1980s and later became a US citizen. She worked for the Association of the Bar of the City of New York while studying literature and philosophy and finally graduated from the Graduate Center of CUNY. She now writes freelance, mostly for Chinese language newspapers and magazines published in North America.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)